The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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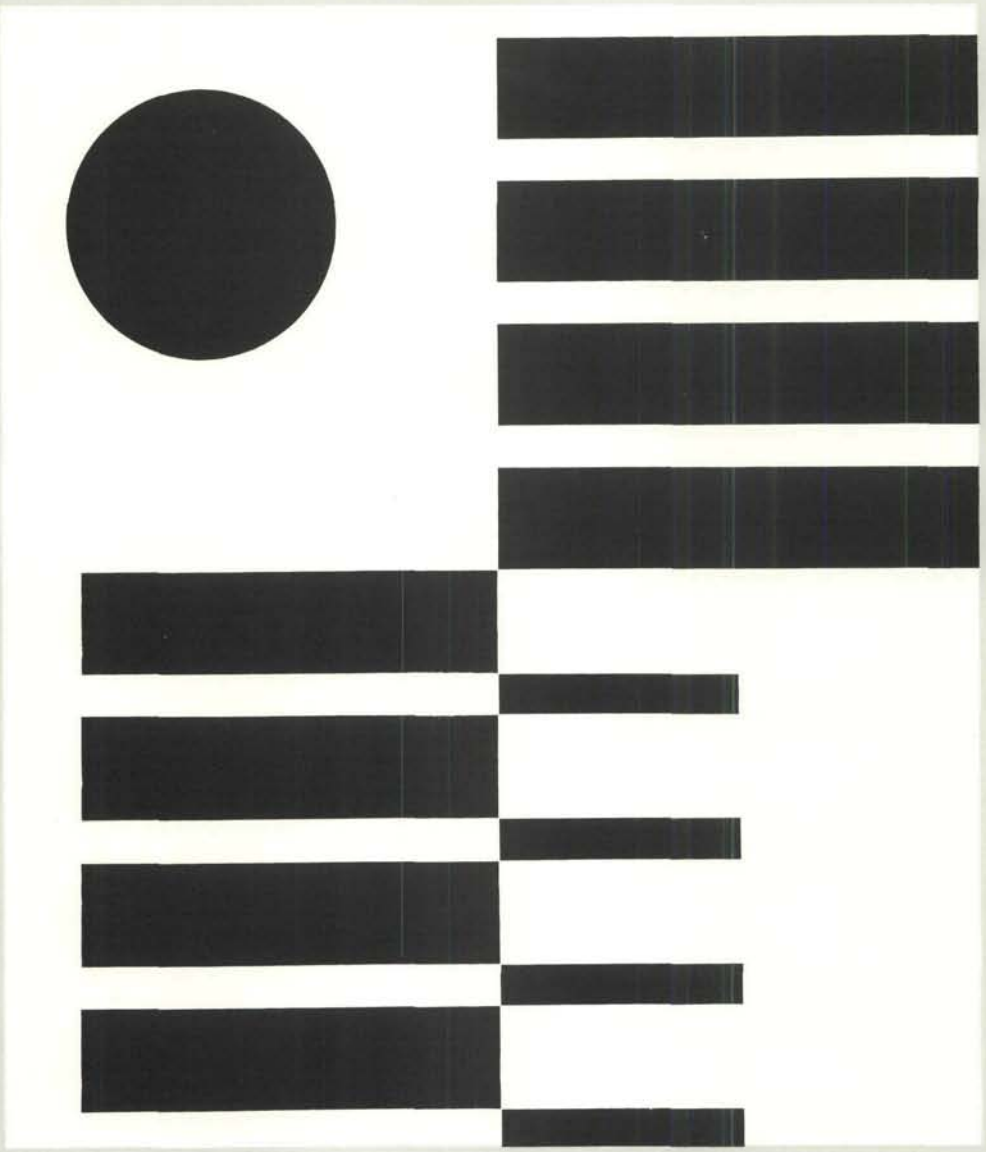

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The lowdown on Richard Gilman

by Hilton Kramer

The point is that most Western intellectual autobiographies, apart from the writings of revolutionaries in whom the life was subordinate to the action in the world, have been luxury items.
—Richard Gilman, in *The Confusion of Realms* (1969)

Reading the memoirs of one's own contemporaries is always, I suppose, a vexing experience. We are naturally curious to know what the period in question—"our" period—looked like from someone else's perspective, and we are naturally curious, too, though we might not always be eager to admit it, to get the lowdown on lives other than our own. Yet it is my impression that these expectations, except on the rare occasions when such memoirs are works of literary genius, are likely to be disappointed. About the period under review in such memoirs we have our own ideas and our own memories, and in anyone else's account of it we are, more often than not, so acutely aware of what has been left out that the past as recounted almost immediately assumes an apocryphal character—not sufficiently compelling as fiction and not really reliable as history.

As for giving us the lowdown on anyone, either the author or such other personalities as crossed his path—well, in this respect too we are likely to be disappointed. It is not that the writers of these memoirs are lacking in candor—that is hardly the case nowadays!—but that they are so lacking in an understanding of the world which has shaped them. So absorbed are they in the imperatives of the self, and so completely is the idea of the self defined in terms of what can only be called a Ptolemaic psychology, that the reality of the world in which they have lived all but disappears. What we are left with is a blinded "I."

This is particularly the case when it comes to discussing the life of culture. For intellectuals—and it is primarily of the lives of intellectuals I am speaking here—the books we read, the music we listen to, the pictures and plays that absorb us at a crucial time in our lives, not to mention the influence wielded by our teachers and mentors, often acquire as much weight in shaping our outlook on life as the origins of our parents and the traditions that have shaped *them*. So, sometimes, do ideas that are "in the air," which, whether we surrender to them or resist them or otherwise come to terms with their presence, leave their mark upon our consciousness. It may even be that real intellectual life can only be said to begin when we attempt to establish some sense of autonomy from the prevailing pressure of such ideas. Why, then, do intellectuals tend to shy away from acknowledging their natural susceptibility to intellectual fashion? It is almost as if the phenomenon of cultural chic represents the last area of experience which cannot be acknowledged, and about which some sort of old-fashioned reticence must therefore at all costs be maintained.

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Certainly there is remarkably little reference to it in the memoir which Richard Gilman has now written about his life in the Fifties.[1] Mr. Gilman is well-known as an author and critic who writes primarily about literature and the theater. In the cultural wars of the Sixties and Seventies he distinguished himself as an energetic votary of everything that was considered radical and "advanced" in the arts. He did not lack for opportunities to wield a certain influence, either. At various times he has been the literary editor and drama critic of *The Commonweal,* the literary editor of *The New Republic,* and the theater critic for *Newsweek* and for *The Nation.* For some years he has also served on the faculty of the School of Drama at Yale. It has been mainly as a critical exponent of "advanced" artistic causes, however, that he has made his name. When an extra pair of hands was needed to lend support to the juggernaut of some smart, overrated reputation—Eldridge Cleaver's, Marshall McLuhan's, The Living Theatre's —Mr. Gilman could always be counted on; and his own reputation has prospered as his especial idols—Susan Sontag, Norman Mailer, William H. Gass, et al.—have succeeded in establishing themselves among the more conspicuous icons of our cultural life. He is, in other words, a member of the club—a voice of the literary establishment which nowadays governs so much in the way of opinion, reputation, and preferment.

Yet it is not to recount the achievements of his literary career that Mr. Gilman has written *Faith, Sex, Mystery,* though the beginnings of that career are indeed described in the book and the entire course of it is briefly sketched. The principal focus here is on the author's religious conversion and its aftermath—on that, but also on the story of his sexual hang-ups. In exactly what relation these two subjects—the conversion and the sexual hang-ups—are to be understood to stand to each other is something of a conundrum, however. No doubt every reader of *Faith, Sex, Mystery* will draw his own conclusions in the matter. If it would be vulgar to suggest that sexual frustration played a significant role in the turn to religion, it must be said that Mr. Gilman has been the first to raise the possibility. But what is interesting about Mr. Gilman's memoir is not really its revelations about religion and sex, for *Faith, Sex, Mystery* is not a book about the spiritual life and still less is it a book about sexual experience. About neither subject does it offer us anything but the most cursory reflections. What *Faith, Sex, Mystery* is, is an attempt at a certain kind of intellectual autobiography, and it is as a document of cultural history that the book is of primary interest: both the cultural history of the Fifties, when many of the events recounted in *Faith, Sex, Mystery* took place; and the cultural history of the Eighties, about which it also has something to tell us.

Shortly before Christmas in 1953, Richard Gilman—then in his late twenties, a veteran of the Pacific campaign in World War II, and until recently an atheist intellectual with, as he writes, "a history of sudden ardent infatuations and temporary commitments to successive theories, movements, ideologies and individual writers"—was baptized into the Catholic Church. For his baptismal names he chose two: Joan of Arc and Thomas More. What made this event somewhat unusual even at the time, which saw a great many conversions to the Church in the literary world, was Mr. Gilman's background.

> At the age of nearly thirty [he writes] an erstwhile militantly atheistic Jew, a boy who had been brought up in a home where the letter of religion was observed if not always the full spirit, an intermittently kosher household, depending on whether his maternal grandparents were living there at particular times, grandparents who spoke Yiddish much more easily and more often than they did English . . . the boy who had been sent on roller skates to Hebrew school three afternoons a week and had held the speed-reading record there for

1 *Faith, Sex, Mystery: A Memoir,* by Richard Gilman; Simon & Schuster, 253 pages, $16.95.

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> some years . . . had been bar mitzvahed with as much panoply as the Depression years would allow . . . had eaten gefilte fish, which he disliked, for the sake of the horseradish that went with it; . . . was familiar with, even though he had an aversion to using, such words as "goyim" and "shiksa" and even "Gentile"; had regarded as terrifying apparitions the nuns he would occasionally see going in and out of—*scuttling* in and out of—the Catholic Church a few blocks away from his home in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn . . . who had thought of the names "Christ" and "Jesus" as suffused with death, verbal coffins; and who late into his twenties had thought of himself as an exemplary product of a rational age, keen on art but on science too, especially humanistic science—this person had become a Catholic . . .

Now in Mr. Gilman's account of this admittedly "problematic" development in his life, he is at some pains to assure us that until a certain day in the summer of 1952 he had never taken the slightest interest in the Christian faith or in religious belief. "If anything distinguished my reading in 1952, when I was twenty-seven," he writes, "it was the fact that it was all quite 'elevated': avant-garde and classical fiction, poetry, literary criticism, history, philosophy, psychology and the like, but nothing in religion, toward which for years my attitude had been thoroughly skeptical, if not quite that of a belligerent atheist." And further: ". . . there had gradually formed in me an erratic and unsteady but discernible body of taste in art and predilections in ideas. For the most part my aesthetic values were strongly avant-garde and my intellectual appetite was for metaphysical and philosophical inquiry that might best be described as avant-garde too."

Some ten pages further along in *Faith, Sex, Mystery* we learn that Mr. Gilman's indifference to reading about religion was not quite as complete as he at first made it sound. Like many other literary intellectuals at the time, he had read Simone Weil's *Waiting for God,* which was introduced to American readers by T. S. Eliot. And to invoke Eliot's name in this context is, of course, to be reminded of the very large place which religion in general and Christian belief in particular occupied in the literary life of the late Forties and early Fifties. There was, in fact, a religious revival in the literary world, and Eliot was by no means the only significant writer involved. So was W. H. Auden, Evelyn Waugh, Allen Tate, the young Robert Lowell, and a good many others. So formidable had this movement already become by 1950 that *Partisan Review,* whose editors were adamantly opposed to it, organized a symposium on "Religion and the Intellectuals" that ran through several numbers of the magazine that year and was afterwards published as a separate paperback booklet. Edmund Wilson's letters of the period are full of fulminations on the subject. When Wilson's old friend Allen Tate became a Catholic convert, Wilson rudely informed him that "Christianity seems to me the worst imposture of any of the religions I know of" (January 4, 1951). And atheists like Wilson had plenty to fulminate against, for religion had once again become fashionable among intellectuals as well as in the country at large.[2]

As a result of this religious revival, certain writers on Catholic theology—Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, and Father Martin D'Arcy, among others—were much read even by non-believers, who felt obliged to delve into the subject in order to keep abreast of what was going on in the literary world. (It was his reading of Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy,* Mr. Gilman tells us, that led him to the Church.) In this period, as I recall, it was not at all unusual for aspiring young writers to date their letters not by the secular calendar but with saints' days. A figure

2 In William L. O'Neill's new book on the Fifties—*American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-1960*—there is a short section devoted to "The Religious Boom." Unfortunately it has nothing to say about the religious revival in the literary world. This is a subject that remains to be written about.

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like Simone Weil rapidly acquired the aura of literary sainthood, and was as likely to be written about in the pages of *Partisan Review* as in those of the religious journals. Young poets seriously wondered whether it was any longer possible to *be* a poet without the support of some orthodox faith, and there were even jokes about critics approaching their work as if they were taking holy orders. Religion was definitely "in."

Given this situation, it is nothing less than astounding to read in Mr. Gilman's memoir that, though deeply immersed in his program of "elevated" reading in this period, he claims to have been totally oblivious to the existence of the religious revival that was sweeping the intellectual scene. It is entirely possible, of course, that he was—though it must be said that it does tax our credulity to believe that any aspiring writer with "advanced" tastes (as Mr. Gilman describes himself as being) could have remained so completely ignorant of one of the reigning literary fashions of the time. But even granting the reality of such ignorance, which is granting a lot, does he have no sense even now that his conversion was not the isolated event it appeared to him at the time to be? Apparently he doesn't. And it is this, even more than the conversion itself—which proved, not surprisingly, to be short-lived—that leaves this reader, anyway, with the sense of some vast area of self-deception at the very heart of the story the author has set out to tell in *Faith, Sex, Mystery.*

Deception and self-deception are, as a matter of fact, the leitmotifs of the book—though they are never openly described as such, and never seriously repented, either. Understandably, Mr. Gilman deceived his family about his conversion; he knew how hard they would take it, and he did not want to cause them unnecessary pain. He also deceived his employers and colleagues at *The Commonweal,* the Catholic weekly he served as literary editor and drama critic, by failing to tell them that he had left the Church even before his tenure at the magazine had begun. (Telling them might have endangered his promising literary career.) By his own account, there seems to have been a considerable element of deception—as well as self-deception—in his first marriage, too, for he was avowedly in the grip of a sexual obsession (he describes it as masochism) which his wife could not be expected to satisfy; and the whole matter was no doubt complicated by the fact that they were living at the time on her inherited income.

By far the greatest of the deceptions which Mr. Gilman seems to have perpetrated upon himself, however, has to do with his life as a Jew. Amazingly, about this subject he has virtually nothing to say in this book beyond acknowledging that he somehow remained a Jew even when he became a Catholic. On the question of his Jewishness, indeed, Mr. Gilman's powers of introspection simply fail him, and toward the whole matter he adopts an attitude bordering on the insouciant. He neither denies its importance nor has anything particularly cogent to say about it. But then, it is difficult to think of *any* subject raised in this book which is discussed with the kind of cogency one has reason to expect from a serious writer. Even the central event of *Faith, Sex, Mystery*—the conversion itself—is recounted in such maudlin, melodramatic terms that it quickly dissolves into sheer sentimentality. Long before the author has disclosed the details of his withdrawal from the Church, the reader has ceased to believe in the religious actuality of the conversion, which has more the look of a psychoanalytic episode than of a spiritual experience. (This being a memoir of the Fifties, psychoanalysis is inevitably part of the story, too.) In offering us the lowdown on his curious personal history Mr. Gilman gives us—no doubt inadvertently—the portrait of a personality so totally self-absorbed that nothing outside the arena of its own gratifications has either reality or meaning.

Except as a document of cultural history, then, *Faith, Sex, Mystery* is something of a blank. And as a document of cultural history it is interesting only for the light it casts on a career that has been tethered from the

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outset to the reigning fashions of the period it has purportedly been devoted to enlightening us about. About the cultural life of the Fifties Mr. Gilman is unilluminating because he still cannot bring himself to understand the relation in which he stood to the intellectual currents of the time. And about the cultural life of the Eighties—well, *Faith, Sex, Mystery* is simply another example of the extent to which a certain mode of moral self-indulgence now passes for literary merit.

Mr. Gilman was surely wrong when he described "most Western intellectual autobiographies" as "luxury items"—he was writing, after all, under the spell of Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*—but in writing *Faith, Sex, Mystery* he has certainly produced a memoir that wholly conforms to that mistaken judgment.

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Matisse: into the Twenties

by Jed Perl

In the years after World War I the paintings of the School of Paris turn pale-complexioned, silver-toned. This new subdued style, which is occasionally disrupted by flashes of overly bright color, like party makeup put on in a pinch, unites the work of Braque, Derain, Gris, Léger, Matisse, and Picasso. The elegant grays call to mind something polished, beautifully composed (a figure composition by David, or a late landscape by Corot), and the retrospective glance of the modern artist (who has already by his own hand reformed tradition) is interesting precisely because it suggests misgivings, second thoughts, unease. The new style can accommodate Léger's machine-age forms, Picasso's brittle, Flaxman-style lines, and Derain's and Matisse's thinned-out pigments, with their reminiscences of the light of a sun-bleached Southern afternoon. All of this is in some sense neoclassical, and all neoclassicism is fueled by a melancholy view of the past.

In Matisse's paintings of the early 1920s the young women who sit in the Nice hotel rooms and apartments actually look a bit depressed, as if they've endured too many of these long, dull mornings and afternoons. The model's quiet mood may mirror some feeling on the part of the artist; but then again Matisse doesn't particularly emphasize her blank-eyed stare. We're intrigued by a mismatch between the subject of the bored young women, the old-fashioned interior with its shutters overlooking the Promenade des Anglais, and what might be called the content, which is the artist's excitement at being able to paint all of this.

There's a bit of the devil in Matisse, the great revolutionary who'd ripped the mask of naturalism from art, putting it ever so gently back on. He paints landscapes in the silvery greens and grays of Corot, as if to announce that the Impressionists were wrong about the colored shadows. He doubles back into the methods of the first half of the nineteenth century, and this must be reckoned with, even if we've arrived at the paintings with an idea firmly planted in our brains that the past is open, that there's no reason not to work in the old way. And then, of course, it's not "the old way." Who had ever painted landscapes from the inside of a car, as Matisse did in 1917, or oscillated between modeled and unmodeled forms as speedily, from painting to painting, month to month? The head of the artist's daughter in *Portrait of Marguerite Asleep,* obviously based on the somnolent women of Courbet (one of which Matisse owned), is a tour de force of gray-tan-white sculpted flesh. The difficult transitions from the neck to the chin and then up and around the cheekbone are masterfully done; and yet the flatness of the elements around the head (the bedclothes, the pillows, the patterns on the pale yellow wallpaper) and the immediacy of the brushwork keep reminding us that this isn't Courbet, isn't the nineteenth century. You can feel jangled in front of this painting,

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caught between thoroughly modern passages and others that push the image back into the distant past. This confusion of periods, styles, manners is frequently nowadays called "postmodern," but the date on the painting is 1920.

Portrait of Marguerite Asleep, which is in the National Gallery of Art's magnificent show, "Henri Matisse: The Early Years in Nice," has only been exhibited once in the past thirty years, and hasn't been illustrated in a book in a quarter of a century.[1] This situation is by no means atypical of the Matisses of the early Twenties—really all of the Twenties—and thus the simple fact of the National Gallery's enormous exhibition having happened is a kind of miracle, a crown atop the group of shows which have in recent years been devoted to the School of Paris since World War I. The National Gallery show, no surprise to many of us, is specked and dabbed and then, in its latter part, packed with masterpieces. The final three rooms, containing the deeply colored interiors and odalisques of the second half of the decade, are as dazzling as the treasury of a medieval cathedral. And yet on leaving the rooms at the National Gallery I had the odd experience of finding myself returning to earlier memories of some of these paintings, which I'd seen in empty galleries at the Pompidou Center, or the Orangerie, or the Baltimore Museum of Art. (As for the paintings from private collections—those we have to come to Washington to see.)

"Matisse: The Early Years in Nice" was organized in the name of scholarship—to complete the record. The curators, who probably wouldn't have considered the project fifteen years ago, may in some half-conscious way believe themselves to have awakened now in the morning after modernism; but they haven't stopped to analyze this feeling. They've just put the dates in order and let the museum officials get the publicity mills rolling. Is scholarship an excuse for a mega-show, or vice versa? That the legendary "anti-modern" Matisse of the 1920s should after all these years receive the blockbuster treatment is far stranger than its having happened to poor, mad Van Gogh. Here is Matisse trying things, questioning everything about his art except the necessity of going on, switching manners with ferocious speed. And one wants to get in tune with all of this. But the atmosphere of the show, with its tape-recorded tour by the museum director and its people hawking things at the end, thrusts the work too far into the limelight and is out of tune with the artist's introspective mood. It isn't only that there are too many people at the National Gallery wondering why they've come; there may even be too many paintings in one place—though of course there isn't one we don't want to see. For those of us who've been thinking about these paintings for years, the show has the impact of something that's been simmering turned onto high and boiled, boiled, boiled.

The early Twenties is a Silver Age of French art: a time that looks back to a lost simplicity and is remembered for its voluptuousness and its self-consciousness. Before the war, there had been the prototypical avant-garde decade, 1905-1915, with its clear sweep of events, its propulsive forward rush. In 1907 you had Matisse painting the *Blue Nude: Souvenir of Biskra*, the revelation of the Cézanne watercolors at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery, the Cézanne retrospective at the Salon d'Automne, and Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. (Of the Cézannes, Leo Stein wrote: "At the Autumn Salon of 1905 people laughed themselves into hysterics before his pictures, in 1906 they were respectful, and in 1907 they were reverent.") In 1908 Braque spent a miraculous summer at l'Estaque painting flattened-out, angular trees and houses, Picasso bought Le Douanier Rousseau's *Portrait of a Woman (Yadwigha)*

1 "Henri Matisse: The Early Years in Nice, 1916-1930" is on view at the National Gallery of Art through March 29. It was organized by curator Jack Cowart and guest curator Dominique Fourcade, who together also wrote the catalogue (published by the National Gallery in association with Abrams; 367 pages, $37.50).

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from a junk dealer and gave the famous banquet, and Matisse painted *Harmony in Red.* The artists were walking into a future they knew was meant for them; and odd events, like Braque's buying a roll of paper printed as *faux bois* in a wallpaper shop on the rue Joseph Vernet in Avignon in September 1912, which inaugurated the *papier collé,* leap out of the history books like scenes from a great novel.

In the Fauve Matisses and Cubist Braques and Picassos all the technique is fresh-minted, spontaneous. The artists weren't on some carefully plotted aesthetic campaign, and the ideas weren't in advance of the art. Everything reached climax at the same moment: there were no strategies, no poses, no affectations. Of course they made mistakes; Matisse's paintings could at times get overly simplified, and the ambiguity of Picasso's Cubism, especially around 1910, in the *Portrait of Vollard* and the *Girl with a Mandolin,* can look half-cooked. But in everything we have from those years there's a single-minded devotion to what's happening on the canvas, and this makes us believe the artists had nothing to think about but art. Their lives were rather small-scale, and in the neighborhoods and cafés life was simple and left them free to follow the logic of painting and sculpture wherever it might lead. (At least this is how we imagine it, how it looks in the accounts of meetings, conversations that have come down.)

For the generation that had made its mark before the war the Twenties didn't necessarily bring a falling off in the quality of the art; it was, though, a time when many artists reacted against their own proto-abstract work. Tastes turned eclectic, nostalgic. Matisse and Picasso were obviously aware that they were reaching a wider audience, and it's a question to what extent their reversion to nature was a cause or an effect. Compared to the few American and Russian collectors of the prewar period, with their idiosyncratic outlook and their courage in the face of the bourgeois mob, the fashionable figures who took up the cause of the avant-garde during and after the war are difficult to appraise, masked as they are by their absorption in mode. But bohemianism had had its own conventions, and by the time of the war many of the principal players were restless, weary of the round of life in Montmartre and Montparnasse. It was good to move on—perhaps to Rome, "a city made of fountains, shadows and moonlight," where Picasso visited in 1917 with Cocteau and the Russian Ballet. By 1918 Picasso had taken up the life of a gentleman on the rue La Boétie, near the newly fashionable galleries of Paul Guillaume and Léonce Rosenberg. And Matisse, at the end of the war, was out of it completely, living mostly on the Côte d'Azur.

Matisse had painted a series of pictures of the model in the studio on the Quai St. Michel overlooking the Seine in 1916-17, and this continued in the hotel room on the Promenade des Anglais, where outside the window there was the narrow Mediterranean beach with its occasional comic palm trees. ("Palm trees," Nabokov says, "are all right only in mirages.") There she is—the model in the room. Or, when Matisse's daughter Marguerite visits, two women in the room. The scenery is unexceptional, a trifle fusty. The furniture gets moved around a bit; the shutters are opened or closed; the women look out the window, sit on the balcony; the light varies, from blue to gold.

The model's face, though occasionally smiling, more often has the abstracted look of the professional doing a job. She's sitting, standing, reclining by the hour, pinned to a place (by the window overlooking the Mediterranean, or, later in the decade, amidst the Moroccan draperies) which is clearly not her own. The difficulty of holding the pose comes through in her somewhat resigned mood (one imagines cramped muscles, blocked circulation). There's an uneasy, artificial relationship between the model and her environment. Matisse has no interest in ordinary life. He's a middle-aged man studying the alien beauty of youth.

Matisse's matter-of-fact approach gives the paintings—and even more so some of

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the drawings—an amazing erotic potency. Nipples, breasts, thighs are caressed, petted with the brush or pencil or pen. He parallels effects we know from porn, but unlike the pornographic artist, who deals in types, Matisse is constructing each form from the ground up. In the fabulously detailed lithographs of odalisques from the mid-Twenties he's in love with every part, and must attempt the complete nude. Matisse takes the woman over (he's the master) but he's also the model's slave (the harem girl's slave) giving full value to her every turn.

Certainly you'd have to go back to Watteau to match the small-scaled force of the *Artist and Model,* done in Nice in 1919. This is the most elusively colored of all Matisses: a vision of the palest pinks and mauves, trapped in a honeyed, yellow-golden light. Horizontal, just over two feet wide, just under two feet high, it has the intimacy of some of the Watteaus: there's the same air of a delicate, complicated project carried off with a pretense of idiotic ease. At center is the model, naked and relaxed in a chair. Everything flows from her: to the left is the bespectacled painter, sitting on a black bentwood chair, hard at work; to the right, toward the foreground, a crowded table top. There are flowers, cloths, chairs, wallpapers, pictures, curtains, each given a certain unique importance.

How, one wonders, did Matisse do this painting? Did he paint the model from life, himself from imagination, or did he have someone sit in for the figure of the artist? The job of piecing it all together must have been (as it was in the Watteaus) immense. The 1919 *Artist and Model* has been unfavorably compared with the 1916-17 *Painter and Model,* a vision of black lines and extreme simplification. The earlier canvas carries its composition on its sleeve, is about its own production; the distortions are needed to make the composition cohere. In 1919 there's no less of a challenge, and it's met on no less easy terms. On more difficult terms, I'd say, for now a mood of lyric ease, a light touch of the brush, is used to lock together a structure of total clarity. How odd, how difficult the space here is: a plunge into depth at the center, a pulling-out at the sides. And what a reconciliation of many things is brought off: the slinky youthfulness of the woman; the lean, comically severe figure of the artist; velvety anemones in a black vase; and all the rest. Often told is the story of Matisse's visits in these years to Renoir, and the old man's amazement at how the young one could hold forms in place with great simple pieces of color. The 1919 painting—whose feathery strokes recall the last, most beautiful of the Renoirs—is a masterpiece of color weights and rhythms. The dull profusion of the Nice hotel room is a challenge, and Matisse rises to meet it.

Why do people dislike the Matisse of the 1920s? It begins early, in 1919, when Jean Cocteau reviews the show at Bernheim-Jeune (Matisse's first in six years) and complains that "The atmosphere of Bonnard, Vuillard and Marquet reigns. The window of one of Vuillard's rooms opens on one of Marquet's seas." (Of course, Matisse had been a bit unpopular in vanguard circles even before he went to Nice. He was a disappointment, for he'd held off from Cubism, from the systematic—or so it seemed—smashing of the object.) "Matisse," Cocteau writes, "works without the deep discipline, the hidden geometry of Cézanne and the old masters." This is a common complaint. The *Artist and Model* is, according to Alfred Barr, "minor and casual." Nice is a time of "relaxation." Experimentation is heavy black lines, large areas of flat color. Relaxation is intimacy, many small areas. And relaxation is also the odalisques, the sexy women of the Twenties.

The inwardness of the paintings attracted many wealthy collectors but it was—and has remained—in conflict with avant-garde taste. The small sizes and intimate internal scale recall the tradition of Watteau, Chardin, and Corot, and contrast with much of Matisse's work both before and after the Twenties, when he's so concerned to burst the bounds of the easel, reach out to a mural

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idea, loosen line from color or color from line. Rather than flood the canvas with a single tone, Matisse here pits colors against one another. Blue, Matisse's beloved empyrean hue, is demoted to a supporting role, and the paintings draw their strength from the dissonances set off by combinations of reds and oranges and greens.

Part of the flavor of many of these paintings, with their cacophony of patterns, their odd, kitschy interiors, rests in our sense of the trouble the artist has in mastering all the complicated decor. Matisse is negotiating many difficulties, and there's the paradox of these difficulties (the patterned wallpapers, Mediterranean vistas) being somehow associated with luxury in the viewer's mind. The paintings are in truth characterized by the very opposite of the quality for which they're generally indicted, which is an excess of ease. We have here the odd baggage of the nineteenth-century studio, which has persisted, partly through Matisse's example, into the life-painting studios of today as the mélange of draperies and pots and fruits that the instructor presents to the students with the comment, "See what you can do with this." It's something to be gotten through (it sinks most artists); but Matisse eats it all up. Especially in the second half of the decade he stays away from the easy, flowing arrangements, the ones that can be taken in with a single move of the eye. And his struggle to realize certain poses echoes the model's difficulty in holding them. He tackles extreme foreshortening (the student's nightmare), or the reclining or seated pose with one leg bent tightly up, breaking the flow. Or he disrupts the unity of the figure with items of clothing—little jackets, pantaloons.

Matisse had been studying the Persian miniatures of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with their dozens of pockets of space marked off by different patterns. In the sweet-and-sour-colored *Interior with Phonograph,* a zigzag path takes us over stripes and shadows and around sharp corners toward a little surprise: the head of the artist, a speck of face reflected in a distant mirror. He's trapped, like a potentate in his palace, amidst the profusion of the two-room studio in the apartment on the Place Charles-Félix. Matisse injects a dose of Eastern exoticism into the flat events of Niçoise life. The two women in white in *The Moroccan Screen* are really rather banal, what with their slouching Twenties poses (Matisse always gets those period details). But the weight of the East is upon them, and so they become two points of rest, two quiet areas amidst the lock-up of patterns that transform their afternoon chat into a legend from the Arabian Nights.

For Matisse, who turned fifty in 1919, the Côte d'Azur offered an escape from family intimacies. Many of the women in the paintings of the Twenties were lovers as well as models, and filled a gap left in the artist's life by his increased estrangement from Madame Matisse during and after the war. To this day Matisse's family preserves a silence about the marriage (they were legally separated in 1940); and it would be nice to know something more about these girls and their relations with Matisse (what they talked about, whether they ate breakfast together, things like that). But Matisse (who, unlike his friend Picasso, had little interest in psychological portraiture) doesn't make us especially curious about his young women, and they're probably destined to live on in the same obscurity as the mistresses of Boucher and Watteau and Raphael, who are revealed by little more than the look in their eyes, or some particular way of holding themselves.

One can sympathize with Lawrence Gowing's claim, in his book on Matisse, that "the object of love was never wholly real to Matisse." And yet the artist-model relationship is real to him—real as a kind of obsessive transaction. If Matisse is a sexist—and I might as well just say it, because it's what I feel, if not before the paintings, then back at home, when I think about them—he's a most self-aware sexist. He's quite conscious of living in the age of the flapper, of the free-spirited gal, and the fitfulness with

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which he sustains the old pictorial fictions of Muse, or Odalisque, or Visitor to the Studio keeps reminding us that he knows time is running out on the model's complicity, on her willingness to be immobilized before the artist's gaze. Still, by some sort of imaginative leap he joins his models with the women of Delacroix, Ingres, Courbet, Corot, and Renoir. He may not tell us anything about his young women as human beings, but he manages to gain them a place in—what would one call it?—the Myth of Woman in French Art. And this has, for Matisse, and for us, as much reality as Venus had for Titian.

Even when Matisse wraps his model up in the whole nineteenth-century romantic dream of a place beyond Europe, his North African world, with its unique ways of seeing, is short-circuited, allegorized, taken into a drama of form and space. Matisse won't paint a triad of odalisques, as Delacroix did in the *Women of Algiers*, or a bevy, as Ingres did in the *Turkish Bath*. The wall-scale masterpiece, with its implications of a complete fiction, is replaced by something fragmentary—a model (or two) in the studio, and some pieces of cloth. In the *Odalisque in a Gray Culotte*—as small and precious as a Persian miniature—the soft pink-gray of the reclining nude, with her marvelously full arms and torso, is tiny in relation to the explosion of draperies and stuffs, a great vertical cascade of red and blue and yellow stripes.

Matisse understands Orientalism as a "painting problem"—and in this he may not be that far from the attitudes of Delacroix and Ingres. Delacroix had spoken in his *Journal* of a perfection which "does not come from an exact imitation of nature" but from "a mind that has selected and summarized." In every inch of the *Women of Algiers* the touristic, the voyeuristic, the Orientalist was transformed into something the artist had experienced firsthand. The dark-complexioned women, the hookah, the tiny curled slippers and thickly patterned rugs, were revealed all at once as alien, exotic, beautiful, trashy, ordinary, even dull. Matisse is piqued by Delacroix's being able to turn Romantic sleaze into French poetry, and for Matisse it's even more of a challenge, because the sleaze is now retro-sleaze, not just pop nostalgia but nineteenth-century pop nostalgia.

Many of Matisse's props—the mirror on the wall, the cushions—could have been borrowed from the set of Delacroix's painting. The contrasts of various colors, different patterns—first stated in Delacroix and Ingres—are pitched higher by Matisse. Matisse frees the depth-defying Oriental motifs from the constraints of Western space; and then he does whatever he must to permit the figure to defend itself, hold place. He's pushing the discoveries of Ingres, who in the *Odalisque and Slave* built the nude out of one unbroken corkscrew curve, so as to balance the explosion of the decor. In Matisse's *Decorative Figure on an Ornamental Ground* the woman, as solid as a block of bronze, challenges another sort of heaviness, the heaviness of pattern. And knitting the two together is something else—a surprising lightness, a delicacy, almost daintiness, in the handling of the paint. To see in Paris, in the span of a day or two, Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* (at the Louvre) and Matisse's *Decorative Figure* (at the Pompidou Center) is to experience not one artist's borrowing from another but something more on the order of an occupation of the nineteenth century by the twentieth. Have Matisse's—and Corot's and Renoir's—variations on the odalisque theme made the narrative element in Delacroix's painting seem less important? Or didn't it matter especially to begin with?

Before and after the odalisques, Matisse tends to liberate painting by simplifying nature. Here, though, the complexity of the accoutrements is left intact. Matisse mediates, but he doesn't choose one thing over another. The Matisse of the Twenties is toying with illusions, as is Picasso in *The Three Musicians* of 1921. There's a dry, sardonic side to their playfulness. Matisse observed in 1941, of the hotels he'd lived in off and on since the Twenties, that they were "fake,

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absurd, terrific, delicious." His absorption in the rococo-revival kitsch of the Riviera and his love affair with the Orientalist trash of Ingres and Delacroix sounds a bit like the Surrealists' passion for the kitsch of Paris. The odalisques of the Twenties are dream visions; they're also down-home experiences —experiences of models in the studio.

Though Matisse did more than any other artist to demonstrate the value of decoration for modern art, the purely decorative—the idea of an art that refers only to itself, to its own conditions—was something he couldn't accept. For Matisse and the rest of the School of Paris, art's essential subject was still people and the world in which they live. We're sometimes surprised by Picasso's statements against abstraction, or Matisse's claim, in the introduction to a book of portraits he published in 1954, that the Northern school, with its exactitude, is the model for portrait art. But this loyalty to nature may well be the life-giving force that kept in forward motion the gigantic baggage the artists carried along as the years went by.

From the poor, hardworking young artist with the loyal wife or mistress, we move on to the satisfaction of desires on an epochal scale—Matisse's beautiful models in a Nice hotel; and Picasso's Fellini-esque parade of mistresses and wives. Who is Matisse or Picasso in 1925 or 1935? Are they the suave masters exhibited in the fashionable London and New York galleries, or the experimentalists we know from the Barnes murals and the pages of *Cahiers d'Art*? How do we account for all the shifts in style? Personal psychology may loom larger as time goes on, and we don't really want to overlook "current events." Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Léger—and all the more so Derain, Dufy, Rouault—are implicated, willy-nilly, in the headlong rush of the century. Purity is as impossible in 1925 as it was possible in 1905.

In Matisse's *Conversation under the Olive Trees* of 1921 the two female figures stand right in the middle of a lawn, and are overwhelmed by the gray-green olive trees and the deep backdrop of Côte d'Azur hills. While Matisse's brushwork here has a casually modern look, he knits the various parts together with an attention to the how and why of nature that's willfully old-fashioned. The composition, which is formal in a self-consciously naïve way, recalls some of Corot's late figures in a landscape, which in their turn echo Claude Lorrain. As for the details of the Twenties costumes (fringed shawls, flowers in the hair, a parasol, a certain cut of high-heeled shoe), it's hard to know if they're meant as a contemporary touch or a throwback to the verisimilitude of Courbet, Manet, and Baudelaire's Painter of Modern Life. What absorbs us in the paintings of the Twenties is their singularity, how much they differ from one another. In *Conversation under the Olive Trees* Matisse somehow manages to make the figures stand in the landscape and convince us of the truth of those women in that place. The significance of the little anecdotal subject is an enigma we can neither clear up nor set aside.

The heroic period of modern art, buried with the war dead, gives way in the Twenties to self-conscious seriousness, mood swings, romantic frivolity. In an essay on Derain published in 1923, the critic Elie Faure spoke of the overwhelming impact of the war. Matisse hadn't served, but it could be said of him, as well as of Derain (whose affairs Matisse helped keep in order), that before the war he'd believed himself a hero, and meant to be like no one else. But afterward, in middle age, "one is willing, at the risk of looking like everyone else, to be oneself."

In a still life of 1924 Matisse includes a book with the name Pascal clearly printed on its cover. This may confound us, until we read, in a letter from Apollinaire to Picasso, in 1918: "Is there today anyone more fresh, more modern, more exact, more laden with richness than Pascal? You appreciate him I believe, and rightly. He is a man we can love." This is a return to French classicism, to the sobriety of perfect, crystalline fragments of prose. The thoughts of Pascal,

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with their careful judgments, their theological system, hold experience at a distance, and anatomize it.

> Those who are accustomed to judge by feeling have no understanding of matters involving reasoning. For they want to go right to the bottom of things at a glance, and are not accustomed to look for principles. The others, on the contrary, who are accustomed to reason from principles, have no understanding of matters involving feelings, because they look for principles and are unable to see things at a glance.

Isn't this the predicament of the artists of the Twenties: caught between feelings and principles, trying one, then the other, back and forth.

Visiting Nice today, one can see, in the curve of the Promenade des Anglais, and the little palm trees, the view Matisse painted. The city is resonant with the heavy comedy of resort-area architecture. It's a place at the border, at the edge of the Mediterranean, from which to contemplate an assault on several traditions—the French, the Oriental. As for Matisse, he didn't believe too much emphasis ought to be put on Nice as a period—a distinct time—in his art. Interviewed by the publisher Tériade in 1951, he said Nice was just one place among many.

> I worked at Nice as I would have worked anywhere. Windows have always interested me because they are a passageway between the exterior and the interior. As for odalisques, I had seen them in Morocco, and so was able to put them in my pictures back in France without playing make-believe.

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What's wrong with the English?

"The Common Pursuit" in New York

by James Atlas

Simon Gray's new play, *The Common Pursuit,* has been something of a literary event in New York this season. Or perhaps I should say a New York event. The night I went to see it at the newly renovated Promenade Theatre on Upper Broadway, a significant proportion of the audience consisted of celebrities. I spotted Lorne Michaels, the director of *Saturday Night Live,* in the company of Paul Simon; Robert Bernstein, the president of Random House; and Claus von Bülow, accompanied by his mistress and his daughter, Cosima, in a leopard-skin leotard. A disparate group, united only by their visibility on the scene; but sufficiently notable to establish that something of importance was happening at the Promenade.

The reviews had been good (or is it enough to say that Frank Rich liked it?), but I'd grown wary of New York theater after a few recent experiences—Wallace Shawn's boring *Aunt Dan and Lemon,* Marsha Norman's lugubrious *'night Mother,* Neil Simon's puerile *Brighton Beach Memoirs.* I don't know if they were good or bad; they were definitely no fun. What intrigued me about *The Common Pursuit* was the subject: literary life in England. It's hard to imagine such a play being written by an American, or about American literary life. For one thing, there is no American literary life. Writers in America are scattered all over the land; New York no longer dominates the scene (if it ever did). In England, where writers tend to congregate around the Cambridge/Oxford/London axis, it's hard to imagine a play these days that's about anything else. Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing,* Harold Pinter's *Betrayal,* and virtually Gray's entire oeuvre dwell in that comfortable, bookish world, a world populated by moderately scruffy, moderately well-off writers, publishers, BBC sorts, people in the arts. They live in North London—Hampstead, say, or Maida Vale—write for *Encounter* and *TLS,* know a very good French restaurant in Soho. They wear tweed jackets patched at the elbows and have an opinion about the poetry of Philip Larkin. Generally they don't teach—there are few writing programs in English universities. Instead they cobble together a career out of free-lance journalism, the odd anthology, a book every two or three years.

Americans in the literary profession regard this world with ambivalence, envying its coziness while reserving a vague contempt for its insularity and self-absorption. There isn't that monstrous, huge ambition that impels American novelists toward the great book, with all the rewards it bestows in money, status, fame. "When success happens to an English writer, he acquires a new typewriter," Martin Amis has observed. "When success happens to an American writer, he acquires a new life." With British writers, the attitude is: write a lot, as much as you can, and show some improvement with every book. William Boyd, Beryl Bainbridge, Anita Brookner are defiantly prolific. In his mid-thirties, A. N. Wilson has pub-

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lished more novels than Saul Bellow. Minor novels, but novels nonetheless; no one objects. Large ambition is looked upon as vulgar; it's not done. David Lodge's latest academic satire sums it up: *Small World*. The only novelists with any claim to greatness in contemporary England—Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul—aren't English. Indeed, they're distinctly foreign—Third Worlders, as it were. And ill-mannered ones at that, pushing with their big important books.

Simon Gray is very much in the *Small World* tradition. The one play of his I'd seen, *Butley*, about a down-at-the-heels English professor at London University who manages to lose both his wife and his male lover in the course of a single day, was indefatigably witty, but never really capitalized on the pathos of the situation. Butley is a sad figure, bitter, alcoholic, vicious, never at a loss for the devastating rejoinder. Himself a professor at Queen Mary College, London, Gray has gotten the seediness of academic life exactly right. The contemporary-novels syllabus ("Burroughs, Genet, Roth, etc."); the language of student papers ("In this sense it might be said that Leontes represents the affliction that is a universal, and so contingently human evil . . ."); the photograph of T. S. Eliot in the dingy office: as a portrait of stifling pedantry, *Butley* is an effective play, as unremittingly bleak as Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*.

As a portrait of human relationships, however, it's a bit sketchy. Butley's wife has a walk-on role; we never learn much about that marriage, or where it went wrong, except that Butley doesn't like women. (So why did he get married?) His lover, Joey, is a pale wallflower of a fellow: a pansy. The other characters—Joey's new lover, Reg Nuttall, a working-class bloke who's made his way up in the publishing world; their fussy colleague, Edna Shaft—are stereotypes. That's the trouble with writing plays; once characters are introduced, you've somehow got to deal with them. Gray never does; he makes everyone a foil for Butley's witticisms. When I saw *Butley* in London, the audience roared. It's the kind of play one thoroughly enjoys, and never thinks about again.

The Common Pursuit is a more complicated play. The story of a group of literary undergraduates at Cambridge in the mid-Sixties, it involves five characters, and all of them *are* characters: Stuart, the editor of a literary magazine he's preparing to launch; Martin, a mild-mannered English major willing to do the drudge work on the magazine; Nick, who openly declares his intention of becoming "a big-name theatre reviewer when I grow up, like Ken what's-it"; Peter, the studious one, "Senior scholar in history, an inevitable First"; and Humphrey, a poet concentrating in philosophy, or "Moral Sciences." (Marigold, the one woman in the play, is scarcely more than an object of competition among the men.)

When we first encounter them, in Stuart's rooms at Cambridge, they're typically callow undergraduates, one-upping each other in a dispute over whether it's Bach or Vivaldi on the record player (*gramophone*, in Cambridge parlance), indulging in salacious banter about pricks and big breasts and who's queer and who isn't—the usual adolescent smirking of virgins. By Scene Two, nine years later, Stuart is set up in an office in Holborn, struggling to keep afloat his marriage and his magazine, *New Literary Review*; Peter's a shabby adulterer; Nick is noisily selling out, lunching with editors from *Vogue*; and so on, each messing up his life in his own way.

Gray is a perfect mimic of London literary talk, the nattering gossip that serves as a disguise for envy and resentment—gossip enlivened in this case by its authenticity. When the play opened in London, critics were quick to point out that Stuart was in actual fact Ian Hamilton, Robert Lowell's biographer and former editor of *The New Review*, the glossy, high-toned magazine he presided over during the early Seventies; the ostentatiously chain-smoking Nick was obviously the late drama critic Kenneth Tynan. The name of Clive James, critic, journalist, television personality, also surfaced in the press, though no one was quite sure how he fig-

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ures in—unless as "Nappies," an offstage presence in competition with Nick for a TV interviewer's job. Humphrey, who loiters about the homosexual underworld and ends up getting murdered by a piece of rough trade, was based (I read somewhere) on a classmate of Gray's at Cambridge who dropped out of sight, became a carpenter, and died in his forties. Everyone is clearly *someone*.

This all makes for a very amusing play, if you happen to be interested in the intricacies of the London lit. scene. Gray's account of Stuart's politicking with the Arts Council for grant money is a clever and comic rehearsal of Ian Hamilton's efforts on behalf of *The New Review,* and he has a good deal to say about Hamilton's relationship with Robert Lowell, whose *Notebook* poems he published in the magazine. In the play, Lowell (not Philip Larkin, as some reviewers supposed) is Hubert Parkin, "our greatest living poet figure," first glimpsed through the window of Stuart's college rooms and later on his main exhibit in the *New Literary Review*. Though he never appears onstage, Parkin is a significant presence in the play; Stuart visits him in the hospital, where he's gone bonkers (as Gray might have put it), scribbling poems that turn out to be shopping lists. "Seeing him like this," Stuart says, "is a—a contamination." Appointed Parkin's authorized biographer, Stuart goes off to New York to flog his book, only to discover that people are less interested in Parkin's poetry than in his life—"especially in its brutal beginning and its spectacular degeneration." Well, yes, that is what happens. "You didn't care for him very much, did you?" remarks Peter. "Not as much as I hoped when I began." Such are the perils of discipleship.

By the end of the play, nothing has quite measured up—for Stuart or for anyone else. Humphrey is dead, Nick is on his way to an early death from emphysema (the disease that killed Tynan); and Peter is an academic hack exiled to Leeds. Only Martin, now a successful independent publisher and married to Marigold, seems mildly content; but then, he's not creative like the others, so what does he know about suffering? The epilogue finds Gray's five characters back in Cambridge, once again the smarmy, bantering undergraduates they were before life cut them down to size, gabbling on about their bright futures—in Martin's line that closes the play, "What we were about to give the world."

Gray has gotten hold of a very good subject—the diminished expectations and forfeited ideals that go by the name of growing up—and he handles it with engaging verve. I wish he had delivered more on the drama within a drama he sets up involving Stuart, whose marriage to Marigold founders on the issue of children—she wants them, he doesn't—and her eventual happy union with the less obsessed Martin; but you can't have everything. As it is, Gray has managed to depict the sadness of life's whittling down, how undramatic failure is. Only the great and tragic are destroyed; the rest of us just shrink until we fit our characters. Humphrey gives up his book on Wagner when he discovers that he doesn't have the imagination to grasp his genius. "Everything I've written about him reduces him to my own sort of size," he explains to Martin. "Which makes him too small to be interesting to me."

Critics have faulted Gray for confining himself to the literary/academic world—a world, complained one London critic, "of limited, incestuous appeal." His plays *are* pretty cramped: *Quartermaine's Terms* is set in a school for foreign-language students in Cambridge; *Man in a Sidecar* is about a well-known lady novelist; *Dog Days* is about a literary editor's mid-life crisis. The one play where Gray has ventured somewhat far afield, *Rear Column,* which deals with a platoon of men stranded in the Congo and their descent into savagery, was a critical disaster. Loitering about the jungle waiting for their leader, the famous explorer H. M. Stanley, to return, they sound remarkably like the undergraduates in *The Common Pursuit*. But never mind. It's not the subject itself that matters, it seems to me; after all,

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Lucky Jim was about academic life. It's a life with as much inherent pathos as any other. Besides, as the playwright himself says plaintively to interviewers, "It's the world I know best." You write about what you know.

Why, then, having been entertained by *The Common Pursuit,* having been flattered by Gray's assumption that his audience would know all about the London literary world, having enjoyed the clever dialogue and the fine performances and the impressive set, did I come away feeling as if I hadn't been told the whole truth? The answer, I suspect, can be found in the title itself. Appropriated from F. R. Leavis—*The Common Pursuit* was one of his most influential books—it conjures up a figure who would seem at first glance remote from Gray's somber but innocent play. Severe, reclusive, invested by his disciples with an almost religious authority, Leavis had an immense influence on the life of Cambridge. Gray once called him "the only great man I have met." The director Peter Hall, a near-contemporary of Gray's, claimed in his *Diaries* that Leavis was "the inspiration of my Cambridge years."

Reading over *The Common Pursuit*—Leavis's, that is—I could see why. His critical voice is stern, resolute, unwavering from its single purpose: to determine what is important in English literature, and why. Yet I could also see why he had so many enemies. His besetting flaw, as many of his critics have noted, was his bullying high-mindedness, his insistence upon defining a canon of great literature that excluded whatever Leavis considered second-rate. The English novel consisted of Jane Austen, George Eliot, James, and Conrad (he later included D. H. Lawrence), and that was that. There was no middle ground. It was either literature or it was nothing. John Gross, in his brilliant chapter on Leavis in *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters,* called him a "salvationist," afflicted with a messianic compulsion to impose his own ideas upon others, so obsessed with "the value of Value that he makes the critical act an end in itself."

All this is true, but reading him is still an exhilarating experience. In his preface to *The Common Pursuit,* Leavis acknowledges that he's borrowed his title from a passage in Eliot's "The Function of Criticism" where Eliot calls upon critics to collaborate in "the common pursuit of true judgment"—and true judgment is what you feel you're getting from Leavis. He reads with a vigilant attention, a sensitivity to style, and an informed scholarly knowledge of what made Swift or Johnson or Pope significant to the public of their day—why and in what spirit their work was applauded or condemned. If he's at times polemical, willing to quote a work of literature to illustrate a moral point, he's still an effective close reader, and deeply sympathetic toward authors he admires. The two essays on Hopkins in *The Common Pursuit* are generous and eloquent; more than any criticism I know, they bring out Hopkins's poetic vitality, a vitality that survived intolerable neglect. Angry, vehement, even punitive Leavis may have been; but he was equally fervent in appreciation.

Gray studied with Leavis, and was impressed, as Hall was, by his unremitting seriousness. It wasn't only—or even mainly—as a teacher of literature that he was held in awe; it was as a moralist. As Hall puts it: "He somehow inculcated a feeling that art was to do with better standards of life and better behaviour." It wasn't a popular approach. Leavis was detested by the English faculty at Cambridge, and never awarded tenure; to the end of his life, he remained a Fellow of the University. It was a bitter experience. *Scrutiny,* the journal he edited for many years, gave over considerable space to the fulminations of his wife Queenie (Q. D. Leavis) against Cambridge literary politics. They stood alone against the world, proud to worship before the shrine of High Culture.

Leavis couldn't have been a more unlikely ally for the ambitious, opportunistic young men depicted in Gray's version of *The Common Pursuit.* In a memoir of his Cambridge years, Gray admits that he didn't dare make reference to Leavis when he was sitting for

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his exams—which made him, the playwright says lightly, "an accomplished liar." Now, all this might have made for interesting drama. Standards of the sort Leavis espoused are rare; to fall short of them is to be human. Gray sensed this dramatic potential—the way expedience gets in the way of ideals. But he didn't make it explicit. In the London version of the play—or in the published text, anyway—his only reference to Leavis was in the title. Those who knew its source could infer the connection; those who didn't . . . well, no big deal. Lately, though, Gray has been engaged in a spate of rewriting—at the Promenade the night I was there, he was lurking about the aisles with a notepad, still tinkering—and he's now dragged Leavis in at the very beginning. Stuart's magazine is called *The Common Pursuit,* and there's much business about the great critic: Stuart has in hand a letter from Leavis promising to support the "embattled and beleaguered" magazine—rhetoric that troubles the young editor. "He makes it sound as if I'm about to surrender."

Not much chance of that. Gray's play, if you think about it long enough, isn't about failure at all. It's about success. Sure, there are reversals, stumblings, the odd minor tragedy along the way. But all's right in the end, isn't it? Or as all right as things get in this world. *The Common Pursuit* reminded me of its much-touted precursor, Frederic Raphael's *The Glittering Prizes,* which had a nearly identical scenario. For Raphael's smug protagonist, Adam Morris, Cambridge is "the city of perspiring dreams"—a pun on Cardinal Newman's evocation of the "dreaming spires" of Oxford. Life after Cambridge is drab, banal, corrupt—betrayals and affairs and marital spats and the humiliation of selling out to Hollywood (I'm referring to the novel, or "novelization," not having seen the televised version); but in the end Adam's book gets rave reviews and a lucrative movie deal. Just like the way it happens in life.

The Common Pursuit is less exuberant than *The Glittering Prizes,* and a good deal less crass, but it doesn't end so badly either. Peter fails to get a chair at Oxford; still, he gets a chair. Stuart is somewhat reduced in stature, chastened by the loss of Marigold, but an eminent biographer; Nick even wants to have him on his show. And Nick, emphysematous Nick, is a literary man-about-town. The only one who suffers is the Leavis-like moralist Humphrey, who refuses to publish his poems because they're not good enough and abandons his book on Wagner because he's not up to it. "What partly killed him was that he couldn't perform his worldly task," according to Nick. "At least to his standards." Is there a lesson in this?

Unfailingly self-deprecating in his interviews and published writings, Gray works to give an impression of humility. The prefaces to the Penguin collection of his plays are tirelessly abject. They stress the loneliness, the fear of failure, the "purple patch between March 1969 and February 1971" when he suffered "three flops in a row." "I seem in retrospect to have spent most of this period with my head down, to conceal as I went about my daily business cheeks that flamed easily and eyes that watered over trifles." Yet what emerges from Gray's journal of the London production, *An Unnatural Pursuit & Other Pieces* (St. Martin's, 1985), is how pleased with himself he really is. For nearly two hundred pages, he recounts the daily crises he endured—finding actors, revising the script, wrangling with producers, dining at restaurants called L'Épicure with Harold Pinter. Not to worry; in the end, it goes off without a hitch. Nothing really troubles Gray; he doesn't even take his own play seriously. He frets about the "delicate, and melancholy and quite amusing (I hope) scene in which Humphrey's death is announced," afraid the audience won't feel sad. But his confidence is irrepressible. Watching the scene where Nick predicts that the Arts Council will turn down a grant to his magazine on the grounds that it's elitist, the playwright begins to wonder if perhaps his own play is elitist. "I observed to Harold, on the way back to the car, that the same charge would probably be made about the play. He

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agreed cheerfully. So, in a spirit of *je-m'en-fou*ism (fuck-'em-allism), we drove elitely back to Holland Park in Harold's Mercedes to a glass of our usual tipple, champagne." I find this a little nauseating, to put it plainly.

Reading Leavis's *The Common Pursuit*—the real one, I'm tempted to say—I came across an essay that clarified the uneasiness Gray's play had induced in me. Entitled "Keynes, Lawrence, and Cambridge," it purports to be a review of Keynes's memoirs, but it's really a dissection of what could be called the Cambridge mentality—the aura of brilliance and precocious accomplishment that defined Bloomsbury. Members of a highly select society known as The Apostles, the group assembled in Cambridge around the turn of the century—Keynes, Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey, and (somewhat earlier) Roger Fry—were exceptional minds, everyone agreed. What troubles Leavis is their self-delight, ill-disguised as irony. What infuriates him is Keynes's claim that D. H. Lawrence was "jealous" of the Cambridge group. Why should Lawrence be jealous? He was a member of an even more exclusive club, Leavis's own Great Tradition; and, like Leavis, originally a working-class boy. What Lawrence was reacting against—and Leavis's defense of him illustrates how movingly sympathetic he could be toward those he perceived as, like himself, outsiders—was the "Cambridge-Bloomsbury ethos," with its covert self-congratulation, its "virtually intact complacency." Here is Leavis on Bloomsbury:

> Articulateness and unreality cultivated together; callowness disguised from itself in articulateness; conceit casing itself safely in a confirmed sense of high sophistication; the uncertainty as to whether one is serious or not taking itself for ironic poise . . . .

Sound familiar?

In his memoir of Cambridge, Gray recalls those years as a mostly painful experience. Beset by financial difficulties, his father emigrated to Halifax just as Gray was preparing to attend Oxford. Instead he ended up in Nova Scotia, at Dalhousie University. By the time he got to Cambridge, determined to study with Leavis, he was in his twenties—not a youthful undergraduate at all and by no means part of the idyllic undergraduate scene. Life at Cambridge for Gray wasn't punting on the Cam; it was "a cold little warren of rooms above a coffeeshop" that he shared with "two other outcasts," and a Christmas dinner of sardines on bread. What if, instead of writing a play about witty young men in their snug, well-appointed college rooms, Gray had written about that Christmas dinner? He might have gotten at the truth of his experience. You never know. But that one dolorous image leaped out at me with more force than anything in the play.

In his journal about *The Common Pursuit,* Gray finds himself worrying about whether his work is too special, too narrow in scope: "But we are, I console myself, what we are." It's the *console* that bothers me.

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What's wrong with the English?

Martin Amis on America

by Bruce Bawer

Among the writer Kingsley Amis's more celebrated productions is the writer Martin Amis. Like his father—and, for that matter, like most of England's current crop of sassy young men of letters—the thirty-seven-year-old Amis *fils* is considerably more versatile and prolific than his typical American counterpart; thus far he has published (in the United States) five novels and a nonfiction book entitled *Invasion of the Space Invaders.* His new book, *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America,* is a collection of twenty-seven articles and reviews from the years 1977 to 1985, most of them originally printed in the English newspaper *The Observer,* all of them concerned with American culture or American writers.[1] The topics include the Playboy mansion, AIDS, life in Palm Beach, the child killings in Atlanta, Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, Kurt Vonnegut, presidential candidate Ronald Reagan (1979), Gloria Steinem, Brian De Palma, and Steven Spielberg. None of these documents—the average length of which is about seven pages—could be described as deeply thoughtful or profound, or even (with one or two exceptions) substantial; at least one, a three-and-a-third-page "profile" of Diana Trilling, is so underdeveloped as to be virtually pointless: Amis doesn't arrive at the Trilling apartment until the top of the second page, and doesn't even get a word out of Mrs. Trilling until the middle of the third page. Several of the longer items in the book, meanwhile, are pastiches of two or more brief scraps. Amis's seventeen-page-long "Norman Mailer: The Avenger and the Bitch," for instance, consists of a 1981 profile of Mailer, a 1982 report on Mailer and his "protégé" Jack Henry Abbott, a "postscript" review of Abbott's *In the Belly of the Beast,* and a 1985 review of Peter Manso's *Mailer: His Life and Times.* Amis has not added a single transitional sentence or paragraph to make a more coherent whole of these cobbled-together fragments; he just runs them in sequence, marking each break with three asterisks. So it goes throughout the book. Nor has he taken the trouble to improve upon the crude, newspapery prose that mars many of the pieces.

But then, one could hardly expect such efforts from Amis. After all, the unwritten code of the sassy young English literary man—a code which Amis obeys religiously—is not to try too hard. The literary man, according to this code, should be clever, not brilliant; energetic, not profound. Chatty and cheeky, impudent and self-indulgent, he should be ready to take on any topic, however serious, but must never behave as if anything could really touch him personally; he should, indeed, regard seriousness as a sort of intellectual version of a dinner jacket—a style he wears when the occasion calls for it, or when he finds himself possessed by a whim to make a somewhat more formal

1 *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America,* by Martin Amis; Viking, 208 pages, $16.95.

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impression than usual. For the most part, however, the tone of his work should be decidedly brisk, sardonic, and offhand, as if he had dictated it hurriedly while on his way to something more important—a literary party, the West End theater, an Oxford banquet. Whereas many a young critic might attempt to establish an air of authority by developing a command of his material, by choosing his words with care, and by assuming a solemn tone, a sassy young English literary man more typically establishes his importance by making it clear that he is above such things—that he has better things to do than polish his prose or try to sound like Edward Gibbon or read everything his subject ever wrote.

So it should not be surprising that *The Moronic Inferno* is packed with redundancies, dangling participles, misspelled names (Karl Schapiro, James Dickie), and problems with subject-verb agreement, or that it contains numerous phrases so clumsy or tautological or just plain unattractive that they make one wince. Amis refers, for instance, to Playboy Club entertainers who sing "popular hits" and to four "random blacks" who were shot by a man in Buffalo; he writes as follows about an annoying neighborhood dog: "A talented barker, he barks boomingly well." Though he travels all the way to Italy to interview Gore Vidal, Amis is not shy about admitting that he hasn't actually *read* most of Vidal—indeed, he cheerfully acknowledges that he's finished only two of Vidal's novels, *Myra Breckenridge* and *Myron*. On the whole, perhaps one of the best things that can be said about the style of *The Moronic Inferno* is that, being as short as they are, Amis's pieces don't have the opportunity to rise to the heights of windiness attained in his novels. Consider the following passage from *Money,* for instance:

> Reading takes a long time, though, don't you find? It takes a long time to get from, say, page twenty-one to page thirty. I mean, first you've got page twenty-three, then page twenty-five, then page twenty-*seven,* then page twenty-*nine,* not to mention the even numbers. Then page thirty. Then you've got page thirty-*one* and page thirty-*three*—there's no end to it. Luckily *Animal Farm* isn't that long a novel. But novels . . . they're all long, aren't they. I mean they're all so *long*.

That Amis has mastered the ways of the sassy young English literary man is plain in the very first pages of *The Moronic Inferno.* Noting that he has been asked "on a couple of occasions" to write a book about America, Amis tells us that the present project began with him "up-ending my desk drawers to prepare a selection of occasional journalism" and discovering that

> I had already written a book about America—unpremeditated, accidental, and in instalments. Of the hundreds of thousands of words I seem to have written for newspapers and magazines in the last fifteen years, about half of them seem to be about America. I hope these disparate pieces add up to something . . . . Oh, no doubt I should have worked harder, made the book more representative, more systematic, et cetera . . . . I should have worked harder, but it was quite hard work getting all this stuff together (photocopying back copies of journals can be a real struggle, what with the weight of the bound volumes and that Xerox flap tangling you up and getting in the way).

This is classic Sassy Young English Literary Man material—Amis seems truly to believe that he is the most amusing thing around, that every little thing he does, as well as every vagrant thought that crosses his mind, deserves his reader's undivided attention. Good show.

Once in a while, to be sure, Amis plays social critic. Indeed, in a manifest attempt to bolster his credibility as a professional observer of life in these United States, he wears his tenuous connections to the Republic on his sleeve—the sleeve of his book, that is: "Martin Amis, who lived in Princeton, New Jersey, as a ten-year-old, whose mother lived in America for years, and whose wife is

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American, feels 'fractionally American' himself." We are meant to understand from this, I suppose, that this is a man who knows his way around America. (And indubitably we are also meant to understand that, since Amis is at least "fractionally" one of us, it's acceptable for him to call America a "moronic inferno"—a phrase which, as he hastens to inform us, comes from Wyndham Lewis by way of Saul Bellow.) In any event, Amis turns from his chatty anecdotes about desk drawers and Xerox flaps to Deadly Serious Matters with lightning speed. At the end of his otherwise inconsequential introduction, he soberly pronounces that "the moronic inferno [the meaning of which he never precisely explains] is not a peculiarly American condition. It is global and perhaps eternal. It is also, of course, primarily a metaphor, a metaphor for human infamy: mass, gross, ever-distracting human infamy. One of the many things I do not understand about Americans is this: what is it like to be a citizen of a superpower, to maintain democratically the means of planetary extinction? I wonder how this contributes to the dreamlife of America, a dreamlife that is so deep and troubled."

One should, of course, take this rhetoric with a grain or two of salt—after all, what we have here is really nothing more than a sassy young English literary man flirting with seriousness. But the fact that Amis chooses to characterize the United States as the prime emblem of "human infamy" *is* worth noting. Why does Amis perceive (or, at least, pretend to perceive) America in this way? Part of the reason, apparently, is that America is the world capital of serial murders ("The Killings in Atlanta"), of murder suspect as celebrity ("The Case of Claus von Bülow"), of serious writer as self-destructive buffoon ("Norman Mailer," "Truman Capote: Knowing Everybody"), of the vulgar rich ("Elvis Presley: He Did It His Way," "Palm Beach: Don't You Love It?"), of pre-Darwinian Protestantism ("Here's Ronnie," "The New Evangelical Right," "Vidal vs. Falwell"), and of impersonal sex ("In Hefnerland," "Gay Talese: Sex-Affirmative"); it is a "drive-in, shopping-mall land" of "condominiums, conurbations, the bleak toytowns formed by mobile homes." (How on earth, incidentally, can anyone from *England,* of all places, have the audacity to call American lower-class dwellings bleak?)

America is, in short, the seat of "excess"—a word that Amis returns to time and again. But the logic by means of which he manages to reach this conclusion is ridiculously circular: he seeks out the most grotesque individuals and gruesome events in America to write about, and then decides (mostly, one suspects, because it provides him with a handy way of uniting these fugitive pieces thematically and of making them seem more important, more *representative* of something) that America itself is, on the evidence of these pieces, grotesque and gruesome. Singlemindedly, he equates one *outré* American phenomenon after another with the nation as a whole: "Like America, [Mailer] went too far in all directions . . . ." "Driving inland from Palm Beach, you are immediately confronted by the booming chaos of middle America." (There's a lot of booming in this book; also a lot of chaos.) As for Capote's life, "All the excess, solipsism, enmity, paranoia and ambition of American letters was crammed into those years . . . ." There is nothing Amis loves more than a sweeping generalization, especially one about the unavoidably drastic (and usually dire) effects of success upon a writer in America, and he makes such a generalization easier to draw by interviewing only writers like Mailer, Capote, Vonnegut, and Vidal, who have indeed allowed themselves to be "transformed" (as Amis puts it) to become media darlings. (Rest assured, there is no interview in *The Moronic Inferno* with Isaac Bashevis Singer.) As for the cases of the Atlanta child murders and of Claus von Bülow, what seems to interest Amis most about them is their luscious ambiguity—which he apparently considers an American characteristic. But why should one be surprised by any of this? As I say, considering that Amis has spent most of his time in America reporting on murders, hanging around Palm Beach and the Play-

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boy mansion, and tagging along after the likes of Jerry Falwell, Norman Mailer, and Truman Capote, one would be astonished if America *didn't* strike him as bizarre, vulgar, crazy, and materialistic.

Of all these subjects it is Saul Bellow who occupies the position of honor. The book opens and closes with pieces about Bellow—admiring reviews of *The Dean's December* and *Him with His Foot in His Mouth* at the beginning, an exceedingly respectful profile at the end. "You need plenty of nerve, ink and energy to do justice to [America]," Amis writes in his review of *The Dean's December,* "and no one has made greater efforts than Saul Bellow." In the Bellow profile, Amis remarks that "whereas the claims of his contemporaries remain more or less unresolved, Saul Bellow really is a great American writer. I think that in a sense he is the writer that the twentieth century has been waiting for . . . . With all sorts of awkwardnesses and rough edges and extraordinary expansions, supremely well-equipped, erudite and humorous, Bellow has made his own experience resonate more memorably than any living writer." But Amis's admiration for Bellow patently has less to do with Bellow's distinction as a writer than with the fact that Amis agrees with Bellow's pronouncements on American society. "[T]his is not an art society," Bellow tells Amis. "It is a money society, a pleasure society." (Amis, instead of asking Bellow to tell us what an "art society" looks like and where we can find one, copies this statement down and proffers it as a prime sample of Bellovian wisdom.)

Amis's own novels make it plain that his vision of America—and, indeed, of life itself—is close to Bellow's. His plotless, frenetic, Rabelaisian novels—*The Rachel Papers* (1973), *Dead Babies* (1975), *Success* (1978), *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981), and *Money* (1985)—are for the most part darkly satiric tales about drug addicts, prostitutes, muggers, sensualists, and assorted grubby, amoral types; though Amis, to be sure, doesn't *like* such people, it is clear that for some reason he likes to think that the world is populated almost entirely by them. He certainly likes to think that America is populated by them (with a few million Falwellites, one supposes, thrown in for good measure). Yet to read a few of his pieces in *The Moronic Inferno* is to realize that when he complains about America's chaos, crudity, and cupidity—and this is true not only of him but of many English literary types—what is actually bugging him is our relative classlessness. Indeed, it is this very classlessness that, from Amis's upper-crust British point of view, makes America seem so anarchic and vulgar. The one constant throughout *The Moronic Inferno* is Amis's amused, supercilious attitude toward the lives and values and tastes of middle-class and lower-middle-class Americans, the cheapness of their homes, the modesty of their cultural attainments, the primitiveness of their *Weltanschauung,* and his amazement that these values and tastes are reflected on television, in fashion design, and in the speeches of presidential candidates. His unspoken complaint throughout the book is that America is the land of the rabble; one piece after another implicitly contrasts Martin Amis, a tiny package of English sophistication, with the huge and tacky people and houses and department stores and office buildings and billboards that constitute America. Perhaps the closest he comes to drawing this contrast explicitly is in the piece on Gloria Steinem, in which the Oxford graduate finds himself strolling around a building at Suffolk Community College on Long Island, "marvell[ing] at [the] variety" in shape and size of the American college students, and wondering: "Do all these people actually *have* a human potential?" (His answer, quite plainly: No, in Thunder!)

This supercilious point of view informs the entire book. The profile of Bellow, for example, begins with a description of Amis's Chicago hotel room:

> The room at the Quality Inn was large and cheap, with thermal drapes and barebacked plugs. All it lacked was quality . . . . From my window I could see a Christian Science church

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> that looked like a hydroelectric plant, the corncobs of two vertical parking lots, a stilted Marina Bank and the limousine glass of IBM Plaza, the El Train, a slow roller-coaster, churning round the bend . . . . Just below lay Sheldon's, prominently offering "Art Material—*for the artist in everyone.*"

Then there is Elvis Presley's Graceland mansion:

> It looks like a brothel or a gangster's triplex: red velour, gilded tassels, simulated waterfalls, polyurethane finish . . . . On to the master bedroom—black suede walls, crimson carpets and curtains, 81 square feet of bed with mortuary headboard and speckled armrests. To one side is an easel supporting a large photograph of Elvis's mother, Gladys; to the other is a sepia-toned portrait of Jesus Christ in his pink nightie.

One may not care to quarrel with Amis's aesthetic verdict upon Quality Inn motel rooms and Elvis Presley's Graceland—but at the same time one cannot quite share his obsession with such phenomena. And for him to carry on about such things the way he does impresses one, after a while, as sheer snobbishness: at times one feels that *The Moronic Inferno* might more justly have been titled *Martin Amis Goes Slumming in America.*

The size of America (and of Americans) bothers Amis too. Simply stated, the place makes him feel small. This fact is amply attested to by his most recent novel, *Money.* Near the beginning of the novel, the narrator-protagonist, a decadent British filmmaker named John Self, proclaims, "I'm big, though, yes I'm a big mother." But he isn't, not compared to most of the Americans who prey on him. Self keeps leaving London for New York, where he finds himself dwarfed by buildings and people alike: "There is a sense, as you sit in your cab and tunnel through the grooves and traps, there is a sharper sense (there must be) of the smallness of human concerns—in New York, where you always feel the height and weight of the tall agencies. Control, purpose, meaning, they're all up there. They're not down here." The novel—which abounds with allusions to *The Waste Land*—is full of fear. "Fear walks tall on this planet. Fear walks big and fat and fine." The cast of characters consists largely of Americans who are threatening, in one way or another, and usually tall, very tall. Self muses: "If you're small and the thing you evade is big (have you ever had this dream?), then the only place to hide is a place where the big thing can't fit. But then you have to stay there, in the small place, or must even shrink to cower deeper. I'm tired of the small place. I've fucking had it with the small place." At one point in the novel Self is sitting in a parked car in a Los Angeles alleyway, having oral sex with a black prostitute named Agnes, when "the door behind my head jerked open, the car light came on like a flashbulb, and there was a seven-foot black pimp snarling down at me with a mahogany baseball bat in his fist." To Amis, this seems to be the archetypal image of America: a seven-foot black pimp with a baseball bat, snarling down at a naked Englishman.

Size is a preoccupation throughout *The Moronic Inferno.* Amis keeps talking about the heights of his subjects. James Robinson, the television evangelist, is "six foot three of US prime, with a sensual, predatory manner and the tumbling unstoppability of the natural demagogue"; Jerry Falwell, who at their first meeting causes Amis to feel "a momentary squeeze of fear," is "six foot and then some, with the squashy-nosed face of the friendly policeman." Gloria Steinem is taller than Amis had expected; Mailer is shorter, and shares Amis's obsession with size: Amis notices that Mailer "refers constantly to the author's 'size,' 'vastness,' 'stature.'" And it is not just the size of *people* that interests Amis. American novels, he suggests, are big perhaps as "an inescapable response to America—twentieth-century America, racially mixed and mobile, twenty-four hour, endless, extreme, superabundantly various. American novels are big all right, but partly because America is big too." And Amis, as he himself cannot help telling us, is

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small. In his piece on Gore Vidal he reports, with a peculiar sort of pleasure, that Vidal once described him in an interview as "a cute little thing"; even more oddly, in *Money* he introduces himself as a minor character, and has his narrator refer to his (Amis's) diminutive size: "I feel strangely protective of little Martin here . . . ." One has the feeling that if America were not so big, Amis wouldn't think it was so bad. At any rate, it seems pretty clear that something is going on in *The Moronic Inferno* that has relatively little to do with America itself and a good deal to do with Amis.

For all its peculiarities and offenses, however, there is much to like—or at least much that one must (sometimes grudgingly) agree with—in this book. For one thing, in spite of his own sloppiness and superficiality, Amis appears sincerely to admire seriousness in other writers and to have minimal tolerance for the more self-indulgent creations (and personal antics) of Norman Mailer, William Burroughs, and the like. Generally, his taste is reliable: he rightly finds the essays of Gore Vidal and Joan Didion, for example, more accomplished than their novels. And he can be perceptive, even witty, about writers and their books. He recognizes that Vidal's primary characteristics are a "fundamental coldness" toward other human beings and a towering self-love. "Here is a man, you feel, who would walk a thousand miles for one of Gore's smiles." He observes that "never being satisfied is [Philip] Roth's great theme," and notes about Roth's Zuckerman trilogy that "There is not enough laughter or lyricism, there is not enough weather, there is not enough happening on the page. The Zuckerman novels look like life before art has properly finished with it. And Roth's corpus still gives the impression of a turbulent talent searching for a decorous way to explode." He can be relied on for a good quip: "As a filmmaker, Brian De Palma knows exactly what he wants. The only question is: why does he want it?" Of De Palma's movies, he jokes that "There's hardly a *sequitur* in sight," and observes:

> Brian has style—a rare and volatile commodity. Style will always convince cinematic purists that the surfaces they admire contain depth, and that clear shortcomings are really subtle virtues in disguise. De Palma isn't logical, so he must be impressionistic. He isn't realistic, so he must be surrealistic. He isn't scrupulous, so he must be audacious. He isn't earnest, so he must be ironical. He isn't funny, so he must be *serious*.

Among the book's more disappointing items—considering Amis's gift for sarcasm and his preoccupation with sex—is the piece on "Hefnerland," which is dull and obvious and (uniquely in this book) overlong; Bob Greene has written more vividly and wittily about the Playboy mansion and William F. Buckley has more succinctly dispatched the Playboy Philosophy. On the other hand, the twelve-page article entitled "Double Jeopardy: Making Sense of AIDS," originally published in *The Observer* in 1985, is perhaps Amis's most solid, sensible, and consistently intelligent piece, utterly free of the self-indulgent touches that damage so many of the other things in the book.

Amis, then, understands many things about certain American subjects. Yet he doesn't really understand America itself—at least not as well as he thinks he does. After reading *The Moronic Inferno* one has the feeling that Amis has noticed everybody in America except the everyday people, the man and woman on the street; he doesn't seem to have the slightest idea what it is like to live a typical American life. In truth, he doesn't seem to *care* what it is like to live a typical American life. In *Money*, when he injected himself into the novel as a character, one was not all that surprised: one had already gathered the impression that here was a man who was bored contemplating other people—whether real or fictional—when he could be contemplating himself. In *The Moronic Inferno* Amis seems not so much to be observing America as to be observing himself in America; time and again one finds him writing not about Mr. Vidal, say, but about how Mr. Vidal reacted to Martin

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Amis. Nor does he have an ear for the American language. In *Money* he has American characters using British colloquialisms; in *The Moronic Inferno,* he reports Norman Mailer as saying, "I've written twice as many books as I should have done." He may have lived in New Jersey as a ten-year-old, may be married to an American, and for all I know may even drive a Chevy, but Martin Amis knows America in only the most superficial way—a way which makes for witty and even occasionally discerning articles and reviews, but which cannot make for a consistently penetrating book.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the publication of Daniel Mark Epstein's new book, *Star of Wonder* (Overlook Press, $15.95). An essay in the book entitled "The Case of Harry Houdini" was published in the October 1986 issue of *The New Criterion.*

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The future of Times Square: the Portman portent

by Susan Woldenberg

Times Square has always welcomed us into its midst. As the double triangular plot formed by the intersection of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, it has provided one of those rare occasions for the natural opening up of the rectilinear grid imposed on Manhattan in 1811. To enter onto that clearing is like coming to the palm of an outstretched hand, after having walked more rigidly along its fingers. As the acknowledged crossroads of the city, ablaze with neon billboards, it seethes with energy. Every kind of activity is to be found there, for every sort of people: movies, theater, restaurants, retail shops, hotels, pornography, prostitution. It is a pleasing low-rise oasis in our horizonless vertical metropolis, the honkytonk heart of New York City and our one indisputable multi-racial enclave: in splendor and squalor, a ribald burlesque of urbanity.

Nevertheless, for almost half a century people have been deploring its tawdry, continually declining condition. It is a commonplace to malign Times Square, and not without reason. Sex-oriented businesses characteristic of all carnival settings have operated there with seeming impunity for many decades—the comparative innocence of ten-cents-a-dance halls having been replaced long ago by the more blatant prostitution of the massage parlors. Amidst turn-of-the-century legitimate theater houses, some dark and some aglow, looms the unmistakable white glare of electronics and trinket shops. The fashionable hotels—the Astor, the Knickerbocker—have vanished; fast-food chains have supplanted the once intimate and expensive restaurants. The grand movie palaces have either been demolished or divided into multiple mini-theaters. *The New York Times* many years ago left the wedge-shaped building that still bears its name; its ghostly form remains, though its limestone gothic façade has been stripped and resurfaced in the sort of barren white marble cladding that reminds one of the walls of public restrooms. A number of dirty, often closed subway entrances further mar the Square's southern end, where the single block on Forty-second Street from Seventh to Eighth Avenues contains the majority of the theaters featuring martial-arts and sex films. There, drug dealing and teenage prostitution create an atmosphere of despair that inevitably taints the entire district.

I used to observe Times Square from a distance, with a certain academic detachment. Just over a year ago, I found the opportunity to move into the area; ever since, I have passed through it at least twice a day, on the way to and from work. If it is plain that much of the Square is radically in need of revitalization, it is also plain that much of it is worth preserving. For example, on Forty-sixth Street between Broadway and Seventh Avenue, the ground floor of a low, trapezoidal building (readily identified by the Coca-Cola sign on its roof) has recently been made over in a manner that, were we less quick to defame the whole

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neighborhood, would permit it to serve as a model amenity for Times Square. Standing just opposite the TKTS ticket booth, its colorful, banner-hung, sausage-begarlanded ceiling and brightly lit interior visible through a floor-to-ceiling glass façade, Café Sbarro has the ambience of a sunny outdoor café on an Italian piazza. Behind it, the Latin Quarter nightclub, popular in the period before and just after the Second World War, has been reopened to fill the void left by the near-extinction of cabarets on the New York scene. Instead of winning awards, as I believe they should, both of these buildings are soon to be razed.

Back in 1969, the Lindsay administration decided that the indispensable key to the rehabilitation of Times Square was the construction of a large commercial hotel. John Portman was chosen as the architect-developer; after many years of planning and construction, the building, called the Marriott Marquis, has just been completed. Despite the hopes with which it was begun, no structure that has been built in New York City in recent years has earned more universal disapprobation. Even the proponents of the Forty-second Street Redevelopment project, three blocks to the south, become uneasy when the subject arises, and no wonder; for the history of failed planning and makeshift compromises behind the monstrous Marquis—the much-admired theaters that were thrown down to make room for it, the special zoning and tax advantages with which it was provided, the promises of urban amenity that it was intended to fulfill—amount to a scenario very much like the one that the Forty-second Street developers have been pushing and shoving their way to, with the hypocritically pious claim that they can "clean up Times Square" by creating three million square feet of office space in high-rises in the heart of the Square. In architectural terms, the Marriott Marquis Hotel is a disaster; in sociological terms, it serves as a warning to all of us that developers in the name of "saving" Times Square may well end by destroying it.

The Marriott is a characteristic specimen of the atrium hotel, whose lineage goes back to 1946. The city was Dallas; the architect was Frank Lloyd Wright. The then-shocking premise was that the downtown appearance of the city and the weather were both equally undesirable; hence they were not to be allowed to impinge on the project. Thus, Wright designed a building that was to occupy an entire city block, sealed for all practical purposes on the exterior, with ramped driveways leading to subterranean parking, and with a vast atrium-court to which activities and views were to be oriented. That unbuilt scheme proved the inspiration for the atrium convention hotel concept—now a cliché—first seen in a Portman incarnation in Atlanta twenty years later. Often in the guise of redevelopment, these hotels have been dropped like slow-fuse time bombs on blighted sites in many American cities ever since.

Far from serving as a positive force for revitalizing rundown urban areas, Portman's hotels are "attractive nuisances," sucking inside each of them, like a vacuum, any life that comes near. The very act of approaching them proves hazardous: a pedestrian who tries to discover a way to get into one of these hotels is confronted by vehicles crossing his formerly sacrosanct sidewalks. Even prospective passersby are deterred by the anti-urban, anti-pedestrian message. No amount of atrium, regardless of whether it is open to the public, can compensate for the destructive effect of such fortresses upon a city's fabric. It is the sense of an accustomed environment long shared by the public that has been lost. The over-scaled mass not only usurps our light and air; exterior detailing has been foregone in the singleminded effort to embellish only the interior. This sort of attitude toward urban architecture provides us with a fatal paradox: in pretending to offer us the incomparable benefits of a great city, it obliterates the city itself.

Why does this happen? In part, because the primary consideration in choosing a location for one of these hotels is the mind-

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numbing "conventioneer convenience factor." Upon arriving at the airport, a visitor need only summon a taxi to the hotel, and then reverse the procedure a few days later. Hotel guests come into a showy self-referential setting, where eating, meeting, and sleeping all happen under the big top of the same circus of activity. Unlike a true urban designer, Portman does his best to ensure that the city in which each of his hotels is placed does not intrude upon the patrons of his introverted "sensaround" world. One wonders whether it would not be more efficient to plug in these self-contained "habitats" right at the airline terminal, a ticket's throw from the baggage-claim counter itself. Squashed down a bit to comply with air traffic regulations, their icy geometric forms would be ideally suited to the bleak tarmac-scapes of airports everywhere. Would Portman's patrons notice that there was nothing beyond the airstrip but brush and darkness? Myself, I tend to doubt it.

Even the most casual student of architecture can see that the New York Marriott Marquis—many miles from any airport, and well beyond walking distance from the new Jacob Javits Convention Center (on Eleventh Avenue in the West Thirties) to which it was intended to be linked—is a compendium of the errors that afflict Portman's atrium hotels. Misplaced on Broadway between Forty-fifth and Forty-sixth Streets, the hotel assumes the posture of a pair of marching slabs (one stepped out in front of the other), with an eighty-foot-high drum propped between them. Like two dry sponges on end, the forms rise five hundred feet on the side streets without setbacks, absorbing daylight and blotting out both sky and city views. With a cladding of serrated grey concrete panels, the lower hundred feet of these flanks resemble ancient foundations heaved up out of the ground and scarred by centuries of brutal contact with the hard schist of Manhattan.

The blind ends of the slabs abutting Broadway embrace the building's front corners, which, since they afford desirable retail space on the street level and unobstructed views from the upper floors, would ordinarily be considered the most valuable space. Yet to Portman, whose buildings take few cues from—and give little back to—their surroundings, this is a fact of scant importance. In an aberration that may be without precedent, he has placed a set of fire stairs in each of the corners of the building's rectangular floor plan, with no regard for the fact that only the two at the rear—buried midblock (with no views) against other buildings—are suitable locations. All four corners are solidly clad, with only a narrow, continuous column of glass (whose genesis may have been the master's own floor-to-roof thumbnail scratch on a study model) to distinguish front from back.

Moving up the slabs' broad outer faces, the monotonous cladding eventually gives way to band after band of fussy fenestration (mullions à la Mondrian) separated only by the thin concrete floor slabs that jut out, like so many untucked shirts, below each row of windows. This may be an attempt at decoration; more likely, it is a harsh screening device; passersby who come within thirty or forty paces of the building and dare to look up are greeted by the apparition—thanks to the set-in-stone Venetian-blind effect—of an entirely windowless façade. In addition, Forty-fifth Street gains an unexpected superlative: at nearly one-tenth of a mile in height, the sheer walls of the Marriott Hotel (extending back some three hundred feet) and those of the Minskoff building directly across the way create between them the deepest manmade canyon in the world.

Unlike the Minskoff, with its truly transparent skin overlooking Broadway, the Marriott boasts a false front of openness along its border with Times Square. Though three-quarters of the drumlike cylinder is thrust out from the main mass of the building above the second floor, and is clad in what appear to be clear, if wavering, black Plexiglas panels, no sense of the interior can be discerned. At night, when you would expect to see the lights of Broadway reflected every

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which way on its faceted surfaces, the only images you actually see recorded there are distant, muted blurs.

From its base to its midsection, the face of the cylinder has been sheared off as if by machete along a line parallel to Broadway in order to provide a flat surface for the placement of signs. There, on a piece of fabric spread over its frame like a bedsheet (from time to time complete with creases), a rear-projection Kodak blow-up is displayed within a border of flashing bulbs. This attempt to convey depth and a sort of super-realism, while suited to an indoor slide presentation, strikes a discordant note in Times Square. Its static imagery is in direct contradiction to the kinetic nature of both the painted billboards and swirling neon signs that enliven and reinforce the act of being there.

Above the cylinder, metal-and-glass ribbing encloses what would seem to be open space between the slabs, which recedes from Broadway as it rises in a shape reminiscent of an old multi-tray cash register, its drawers unhinged. Yet, instead of opening the front to the sky, this inelegant gesture merely heightens one's sense of oppression as more and more of the enormous concrete backsides of the slabs are laid bare, creating a sort of repellent force field between them.

As one moves far enough away (measured in blocks, not feet) to glimpse the skyplane, a vestigial black-edged and vertically lined glass cube about fifty feet wide emerges from the top of the building. Its Miesian crispness is at odds with all that lies below, as well as with the stakelike concrete core through its center. Morning light penetrates the panes to reveal the outlines of a larger cylinder within—this time formed from rings of exposed concrete. From the street, it is hard to say which fantasy this object more nearly resembles: a crystal-capped water tower or, perhaps, an oversized stereo turntable with the smoked Plexiglas cover that was *de rigueur* in the Sixties. Actually, this rooftop temple is an act of homage—or, rather, piracy—in the form of a slice of the famous laboratory tower for the Johnson Wax Company in Racine, Wisconsin, also designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Portman's rendition of it doesn't hold water; instead it serves as a revolving restaurant, its laborious fatuity an insult to the man who inspired Portman's career.

Of far greater consequence to those of us who confront the building every day is the question of what happens where the structure meets the ground. The answer is, not much. In an architectural sense, the building has no base. The Marriott simply levitates aggressively over Broadway with that tumid protuberance (the cylinder), as if asking for a fight. In this location Portman had the opportunity to create a grand entrance to his two-thousand-room convention hotel while still fulfilling the implicit obligation to maintain the staccato rhythm of shops, restaurants, and theaters that are the hallmark of Broadway. He chose to ignore both the opportunity and the obligation.

The Marriott spans an entire two-hundred-foot block-front on the west side of Broadway in Times Square without a single pedestrian amenity, and with scarcely a hint of how to get into the hotel. The ground-floor exterior of the monolith is marked by a negligible lifting of its dull concrete apron to reveal a cheap glass underskirt and two wholly uninviting dark orifices. Even though one does not see light at the end of these short tunnels, there is an intimation of activity beyond. As if by default, we grope our way past an assortment of adjunct elements (including the fire-stair exit and exposed supports) that give new meaning to the term crawl space, only to find ourselves marooned on a lavish five-lane thoroughfare, from which vehicular ramps in the distance descend to unplumbable depths. Glittering quartzlike crystals shine out from the fresh asphalt, as car headlights dance across the sweeping surface. On the entire façade, the only significant architectural gesture indicating entrance spans not a walkway, but rather this driveway. There, facing out to each side street, four-ply appliqué concrete arches studded with light bulbs are aligned like horseshoes on a hook.

At the far end of the unregulated livery haven, revolving doors, through which we

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see high-gloss, white-veined black marble flooring, suggest that the hotel proper is finally at hand. Hypnotized by what appear to be glass doors and hallways ad infinitum, we proceed westward, past a couple of escalators and the rear of a ring of elevators, in search of the lobby. Alas, we find we have entered—or rather exited—into a puzzling void: a dimly lit, boxy, block-through passage wide enough for a couple of Mack trucks, and curiously finished in a mirrored rear wall. Its only props are a very low padded rail along its edge and, sporadically, racks of baggage that provide a clue as to its intended and presumably essential function. On axis with the Shubert Alley to the south, it is a ghostly hollow, though assuredly not the memorial one would have hoped for to the Helen Hayes and the Morosco theaters, which had stood back-to-back on that spot for over fifty years until Portman claimed that he needed the space.

In fact, eight floors remain between the ground floor and the so-called sky lobby. Riding the scissor escalators that cut back and forth between them, we find floor after floor of indistinguishable central lobbies—in this case, a euphemism for no-man's zones. The space beyond these lobbies, facing Times Square, is given over to a theater and to convertible meeting rooms. On the sixth floor, this space becomes a double-height ballroom when partitions that square the curve of the cylinder wall are folded away. There, the semi-circular outer wall is engulfed in curtains, fastened into place like the strands of tiny lights stapled to each of their folds. Urged on by our memory of the dark glass outer wall, we mount the dance-floor platform to gain a panoramic view of Times Square. Surreptitiously tugging aside the heavy drapery, we unveil an immovable plaster wall. The glazed exterior turns out to be a hoax; no doubt the little bulbs that decorate the draperies are intended to serve as a sanitized substitute for the helter-skelter riot of lights outside.

From our point of arrival at the eighth-floor lobby, where the many-storied atrium begins, we have to walk a considerable distance under an eight-foot ceiling before we are able to take it in. To make matters worse, a golden pergola has been inserted over what one presumes to be the chosen path, adjacent to the registration counter. A welcome-to-the-casbah tented dining room is nestled alongside. After only a few more steps, we find ourselves at the foot of the forty-story atrium, where we may sit, for the price of a cocktail, to observe at our leisure Portman's trademark creation.

From this vantage point, the glass elevators become the attraction they were apparently meant to be. Strings of lights decorate their pumpkinlike segments; dot-dot-dot patterns accentuate the sense of motion as the cabs dart up and down the fluted central mast. Attempting to catch one of the dozen podlike elevators at the interior of the circular bank becomes a feat of acrobatics. What should have been a clear line of vision to all of the cabs has been obscured through the insertion of four conventional, solid-walled cabs for the faint-hearted at the center of the space. Mirrored surfaces add to the confusion, as bells ring and lights flash just out of range, announcing the arrival of one of the sixteen cabs. But where? Too late. People dart this way and that in search of the next available prize.

The atrium itself resembles the interior courtyard of an overbuilt city block. It is hard to believe that so much can amount to so little. The decision to group the elevators in the middle, rather than to place them in the corners, turns the atrium into a sort of mine shaft, whose encroaching fourth wall chokes the core at its peak. Black cattle-catcher metal frames extend out beyond the bands of the parapets, over the open pit. This decoration (intended, perhaps, to prevent suicides?) provides the only relief from the otherwise monotonous beige pallor of the entire interior. The walkways—for the most part unpeopled—feel remote; rather than popping out to enliven the space, the parapets at their edges seem merely an empty echo of the bland hotel room walls they shield. This vertical atrium

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may well contain the largest display of gypsum board ever assembled; it has the flimsy feel of a house of cards.

Leaving the unexpectedly confining well of the atrium, we pass an oversized conversation pit rimmed with marble edges and cushioned benches that seems to have been plucked from an early modern living room and given new life as a coffee shop. Beyond it, we walk between twinned ramplike winding stairs that lead out to a mezzanine on our way to a rotating cocktail lounge that completes the cylinder and affords its only true windows. We come here childishly seeking the thrill of drifting over Times Square on a merry-go-round for adults. Seated at a table along the outer ring, moving at the speed of one revolution per hour, we hope to savor at last that sweeping view of Broadway that has eluded us at every level below.

The results, however, are disappointing. A landscaped border separates the seating area from the edge. Instead of being at the periphery, we are far too safely set in, isolated by rocks and planting. Evidently, the decision was made that the best way to view Times Square—to see it in its proper light—was through a screen of greenery. Could anything be more absurd? The revolving deck of the lounge conjures up the flying saucers familiar to 1950s science-fiction film fans. As I recall, though they were presumably designed to gather information as they hovered over planet Earth, they lacked windows along their underbellies and therefore permitted their occupants no visual sense of what they were passing over. In a similar fashion, the perspective from the earthbound vessel of the Marquis bar limits our view to a few upper floors of the buildings across the way—well above all the street amenities. Even when standing to leave this seven-foot-high space, we can see little more, as the extended plane of the gardened floor edge cuts off our view to the street. We have to look up, into the mirrored ceiling, instead of outward, to get a glimpse of the teeming life below—in particular, that Portman-forsaken creature, the pedestrian, and the storefronts and theaters that have drawn him to Times Square. Here they are captured like pickled specimens on glass: upside-down images in a humorless funhouse.

Once we have had enough of horizontal motion in the cocktail lounge, we permit the pumpkin-coach elevators to catapult us up to the building's forty-eighth floor peak. We are welcomed there by cheery, skirted usherettes, with oversized menus poised on their hips. Unlike the bar we were in forty floors below, this rooftop restaurant's glass-walled circle revolves within a glass-walled square. The result is a hermetic environment, twice-sealed, remote from the city that surrounds it. For some of us, tears well up even before the rolls and butter arrive. Overcome with a sense of impending suffocation, we furtively glance back and surmise the difficulty of slipping out without placing an order. Like how many before us, we wonder, shall we request permission to order, in lieu of our expected meal, only "a quick (stiff) drink"?

We sit there impassively, noting without pleasure that our position on the rotating circle seems continually to test but never to escape the edges of its cube of confinement. The two separate glass outer walls seem to merge only at the four points in the rotation where the circle is tangent to the square. Like the perspective of an intoxicated tavern dweller, barely able to lift his face above the table to see beyond the dead weights to either side that are his own arms, the restaurant's lateral views are overwhelmed by the solid tops and backsides of the hotel-room side slabs. Front and rear views as varied as Rockefeller Center and the Hudson River—obstructed by no other buildings at this dizzying height of nearly five hundred feet—must be seen through the prisonlike vertical striping of the outer cage's black mullions. Clearly, the Marriott is its own worst enemy.

Having made good our escape to the street, we prepare to pay a visit to the sixteen-hundred-seat theater that has been

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touted as the chief amenity of the hotel. A pair of gas-illuminated, cartoonish little signs (like fluorescent ceiling fixtures on their sides) announce the Marriott Marquis Theater and its musical fare. Slung out perilously low at right angles to each other over the sidewalk, these signs are like the bad memory of the real marquees under which theater patrons customarily meet. Instead, one may now witness the pre-performance spectacle of lost souls waving tickets forlornly as they seek their mates in the netherworld beneath the entire complex. Dodging taxis and limos on this paved throwback to the Styx, they call out in tentative tones to passing strangers the riddle of the Marriott: "Can you tell me how to get to the theater?" It is certainly a puzzle, and one with no happy solution.

Not far from the signs, revolving doors labeled "Box Office" deposit us directly in front of a ticket counter; all we need now are deft footwork and diplomacy for the uncomfortable task of shuffling to the rear of the queues that are already wedged into this constricted corridor. We hardly reach the end of the lines as another revolving door at the opposite end of the small L-shaped hallway swats us back to the out-of-doors. A half hour before curtain time, we "ticket holders"—so identified by a cardboard sign—may enter and walk single file along a further cramped passageway parallel to the sidewalk but antiseptically set apart from it by glass walls. Here the corner fire stairs have been suppressed to permit the insertion of a single-passenger escalator. At its top, we must wind through yet another corridor, and then up one more tube before nearly colliding with the rear wall of the theater itself. Sighs of relief are actually audible at this juncture, as compressed theatergoers spread into a broader corridor from which they sense that escape routes *must* exist. On this third-floor level, interior storefronts displaying theater memorabilia offer a strange twist to the once-vital notion of "shops *on* Broadway."

The theater lobby module—glass doors inserted into a ceilingless curved glass partition wall—echoes the standard layout of movie theaters found in shopping malls. Outside its doors, banks of telephones, a rounded ottoman, and doorless, undersized washrooms appear in duplicate, in the nature of just about everything else in this invisibly bifurcated space. This is in keeping with the first commandment of the building's overall design: "That which cannot be centered shall be paired." During intermission, the stampede of patrons who wish to relieve themselves are forced literally to take sides, and then queue up like cattle along the extended baffles that substitute for entries to these facilities.

By the time the theater's street and lobby doors are thrown open, the more intrepid of the elderly couples who frequent such musical houses have already ferreted out a circuitous route through the hotel to this inner lobby's lobby. Jubilantly, they enter, only to draw back upon discovering the immediate and sharp descent that separates them from the auditorium. To stand still would require great stamina; to mount either of the matched winding stairs to the balcony would be reckless and perhaps unnecessary; to gather strength from one of the bars nestled within would be premature. (The alternative—a pair of narrow semicircular ramps—can scarcely be located without consulting blueprints of the building.) With the press of the crowd at their backs, it is plummet or perish.

The scene that ensues could have been choreographed by Mike Nichols. Slowly, and with great care, the couples join hands to offer mutual aid for their journey downward. The bobbing duos appear like so many railroad handcars sidling down a precipitous red-carpeted pass. First two heads are even, then one drops, then the other comes down, and so on, in a sea of confusion; clinging together for dear life, each pair tries to sidestep the rest along the way, only to find themselves nearly colliding with the snack bar.

Through a final set of doors, one enters the auditorium as if at the top of an unadorned great white bowl. The steep rake

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results in unimpeded sight lines; stepped aisles point to the sharp angle of the decline. Inexplicable irregularities in the height and placement of the steps increase the chance that we may lose our footing. A slatted wood ceiling lends warmth and visual interest to the otherwise undecorated space. In an age of amplified sound, it is anyone's guess as to the acoustic merits of either the design or the materials used.

The difficulty of attaining one's place in the theater and the ambiguity of the auditorium's design are characteristic of the difficulties and ambiguities of the building as a whole. Where everything ought to have been made simple for the visitor, everything has been made complex. Obstacles abound, seemingly out of malice or mischievousness. Its endless, anfractuous spaces are charged not with the nourishment of life but with a profound emptiness. Inside and out, its great pale blank walls are a *tabula rasa,* on which waits to be written *"Noli me tangere."*

The Portman Hotel, which was intended to bring new life to Times Square, instead has markedly increased its sense of desolation. The design for the New York Portman hotel first appeared during the renewal-inspired late Sixties. Though it took until recently to gain final approvals, the arbitrary scheme has remained nearly the same since its inception. Had it been built almost twenty years ago, it would now be regarded as an embarrassing mistake—a textbook study of how *not* to revitalize a neighborhood, but rather to hasten its demise. Yet it was not built in the Sixties. Surely in America today no planner is unaware of the careless and overly facile nature of every argument that legitimized filling a city with such buildings, entirely divorced from their surroundings, bearing no responsibility or relationship to them. The decision of the city and the developer-architect to put it up at this late date was not made out of ignorance; it was made with full awareness of the facts.

And it is almost certainly a harbinger of what is to come: the entire Square, from Forty-second Street to Fiftieth Street, is on the verge of a radical transformation. The current effort by the New York State Urban Development Corporation and the city to build three million square feet of office space in four matching, clownish buildings designed for developer George Klein by the Johnson/Burgee firm at the crossroads of Forty-second and Seventh Avenue is only one of many projects already under way. It is also by far the biggest, and, as the bellwether, it threatens to have the greatest impact.

By accident or by calculation, exceptional attention has been devoted to the space between the Johnson/Burgee skyscrapers occupied by the comparatively tiny Times Tower. This bastardized structure has been adopted by the pro and con parties with such fervor as to suggest that it is the essence of the place, and that in its destiny lies the fate of the entire district. The question of the hour has become whether to knock it down or to save it, to resurface it or to skeletalize it, to replace it with a triangular ice-skating rink in the image of Rockefeller Center or with a ninety-foot-high apple concocted by Philadelphia architectural guru Robert Venturi. (The apple was described in *The New York Times* by its architecture critic Paul Goldberger as "shocking, difficult to accept at first—and brilliant . . . the genius of this work lies in its ability to manipulate proportion and the element of surprise in such a way as to make us think of the apple as a monumental object, not as a common piece of fruit.") The only benefit that has accrued from this curious concentration on the tower is the revival by *New York Newsday* of the so-called zipper sign of flashing news briefs that wraps the otherwise sorry structure at a height easily seen from the street. And, though the pointed prow of the tower is still visible as one looks south from the north end of the Square, it no longer provides a pleasingly open endpoint to the space. With a disquieting note of finality, the vast lateral mass of the Marriott Marquis destroys the former clarity of that vision.

While the Municipal Arts Society and other groups fiddle with the tower, parcels

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of property in the area are being accumulated by major developers. With the added impetus provided by the City Planning Commission's 1982 up-zoning of the west side of midtown, plans began to be announced for the construction of fifty-story as-of-right structures on nearly every block-front between Forty-fourth and Fiftieth Streets to complete the conversion of Times Square into yet another giant office park, no more appealing than Sixth Avenue, and no more peopled after dark and on weekends than Wall Street.

Ever since the near bankruptcy of the city during the Beame administration, officials have claimed that increased tax revenues based on incessant building would eventually prove of benefit to all classes of citizens. (It is a great relief to be able to say that what is good for the coffers is good for the masses.) Their claim in respect to Times Square is that they are not only encouraging construction but also cleaning up a blighted area, a task that can't be accomplished with a few small buildings, or within the overly large zoning allowances. They choose to ignore the fact that even in its current state the area generates well over one billion dollars a year in revenue from a worldwide army of tourists. Yet, to developers and their lending institutions, "street life" is assumed to be synonymous with "low life"; the concept of the "man on the street" is an anomaly, to be regarded with suspicion. After all, they reason, what could he be doing there anyway? Once the district is recast, the visitor's only recollection would be that of an absence rather than of a presence of any kind. Are we to accept this ritual disembowelment of the city as the only possible solution to its problems?

If the plans of the present city administration are carried out, the effect will be to make the place as undesirable as possible so that no one will come into the area unless he has "legitimate" business there—that is, the kind that can be conducted over a desk, in an office, scores of floors above the street. Mayor Koch and the City Planning Commission appear bent on achieving this negative result. (Were the "problem" the opposite, and the goal to attract the populace—as Times Square indeed does—it would be nearly impossible to count on achieving success.) The editorials in *The New York Times* have often denigrated Times Square and urged its rehabilitation; with the election to its editorial board of Herbert Sturz, until recently head of the City Planning Commission, the *Times* can be counted on to give added support to the administration's plans.

Obviously, not everyone is content with these goals. Yet, instead of establishing a coherent battle plan to prevent the destruction of the area, worthy but ineffectual committees to "sort of" save Times Square consider how to make the new office high-rise district appear like its former low-rise entertainment district self. (A district that even today is in a remarkable state of preservation: in the past decade, over sixty-five million dollars have been spent on the renovation of its forty-odd legitimate theaters.) These committees send out ground crews to comb the area by day and by night, with light meters, measuring sticks, and field cameras, trying to document and capture its essential, albeit waning character, like ethnographers chasing after a dying culture. One proposal, bearing more relation to Oz than to Gotham, called for the application of light-emanating paint to the sidewalks, so that it might bounce off the blank new buildings and then be reflected into the eyes of the brisk-moving businessmen.

As a result of these analyses, guidelines have been proposed for a three-tiered system of signage—a "decorated-shed" concept raised to a skyscraper scale—for new construction in the area. These provisions, which the city is expected to adopt in some form, would require building setbacks above certain heights in order to accommodate billboard supports. Everyone is aware, of course, that the Times Tower, whether denuded or restored, is not Times Square; it is less obvious that any attempt to transfer the experience of a place to one symbol or device alters the nature of that experience

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and almost certainly assures its dissolution. In any event, few people would claim that signage guidelines amount to a substantial victory. With or without them, it is likely to be only a matter of construction scheduling that will determine the speed with which Times Square is turned into a desk set of building-objects, with a stipulated number of lights and signs pinned to their dull exteriors as emblems of a happier past, like the smiles undertakers affix to corpses.

How extraordinary in principle (and yet how common in the history of our city) that we should pay so little serious attention to the hulking Marriott Marquis which has shouldered its way into our midst and which embodies so many of the mistakes that we are about to commit on an even grander scale. A number of these mistakes are intrinsic to the atrium concept (which unfortunately flourishes in all our new office buildings as well) and go back, through Portman, to Frank Lloyd Wright's hotel project in Dallas. Wright despised cities, as Portman appears to do, and loved automobiles, as Portman also appears to do, bringing them as he does by the hundreds into the pedestrian heart of a city that already talks of banning them altogether. It can be said on Wright's behalf that, hating the inorganic nature of the city, he sought to mitigate its harshness by bringing the green countryside into it; Portman, on the other hand, seeks merely to encapsulate the ideal city of his trumpery imagination.

The Marriott Marquis may well be the worst of Portman's hotels—a building appropriate in his view to a city that he appears to despise and certainly misunderstands. It is a strong hint of his distaste for the vulgar energy of New York City, especially as it manifests itself in the honkytonk atmosphere of Times Square, that he has presented us with a building that might have been fashioned out of cardboard in some faraway shantytown. It is as if he were fastidiously saying, "Here in my sealed box is a little imitation city, in which you will be safe from the spontaneous hurly-burly outside. The air you breathe will be pure, nothing you look upon will give offense, no accident will take place more serious than the spilling of a canapé. Rather than have you waste your energy on walking, I will move you about on escalators, in rocketlike elevators, and on rotating platforms. I will provide you with a utopian Main Street, from which every urban irritant has been purged." The overwhelming objection to Portman's Main Street is that it is the main street of a small town and not of a great city. Mindlessly, we are guided past paired pots of flowers and bubbling fountains; under the simulacrum of a summer sky, we are at home among the living dead. That is, if the phrase "at home" can possibly be uttered by any true New Yorker within the walls of this mausoleum, so blunderingly contemptuous of a city that, to our astonishment, may yet pay it the tribute of a hundred imitations.

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"Opera"
by Herbert Morris

Mother sits in the back seat lulled by Verdi,
I beside her, the winter I am seven,
the Rockaways, Father has us believe,
our destination, for a glimpse of the sea,

though we have seen the sea before, my brother
and I, if not yet to the degree Father
would have us see—light, lights, half-lights, gradations—,
sufficiently for us to cry "the sea,"

two boys, seven and twelve, who, having followed
Father headlong in pursuit of routes south,
south, always south, smell the Bay, cross the causeway,
are at last, blinded, stunned, made to confront it.

Father has memorized each rise, each turn,
knows them by heart, as my brother does, too,
it seems, seated as he is in the front seat
with a view of what opens out before us,

I, in what would seem, on the surface, a less
advantageous position, with a view
not as inclusive, car-bound, but, despite that,
bearing an intensity quite beyond

what the mere fact, for all its worth, attests to,
an interior view, one might describe it.
(Why did I not believe, even now fail to,
Rockaway, as claimed, was our destination:

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was it likely, possible, all that sky,
all those deep routes opening out before us,
all the fervor of that day-long pursuit,
all that light, all those lights, half-lights, gradations,

deliver us to this, not more than this,
three syllables too composed, too domestic,
to bear us south to the fierce, the exotic,
lacking the least frail light, lights, necessary?)

Mother, in the back seat, hums Donizetti.
It is cold in the car. I sit beside her
nuzzling the grey fox collar of her coat,
asleep, or half-asleep, or merely dreaming

(voyages into life, my life, the music
lying in wait where music lies in wait,
where one senses music must lie in wait),
those voices sweeping to us from Manhattan,

wave on wave, at full tide, breaking across us,
mezzo soprano after mezzo soprano,
one outpacing the other, teaching us
how to live, what to suffer, moving us

in ways we thought, once, we could not be moved,
the car robe tucked and folded in our laps,
blue, like the car, one side faced with soft wool,
the other with smooth Russian karacul

whose knack it is, or was, or always shall be,
to catch the light of each bleached scene we pass through,
light, lights, half-lights, the infinite gradations,
highway, field, causeway, marshland, swampflat, beach,

in a far corner, bold yet modest, quiet,
neither self-effacing nor prepossessing,
an emblem of the same blue, sea-blue, wool,
embossed to shape a circle, duplicating

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the initials Mother and Father both share,
an intricate, elaborate nest of scrolls,
inordinately difficult to follow,
from which it seems there shall be no escape,

yet, in a resolution near the border,
curlicues signifying, somewhere, ends
(or beginnings—one cannot yet know which)
neither looked to nor hoped for, unexpected,

fretwork coming, at last, into its own,
worked and reworked, the way cleared, almost cleared,
if not yet cleared, clearing, soon to be cleared,
flowering into something evident,

apparent, from the most hidden of sources,
burdened with complication, breaking into
the most magnificent lucidity
imaginable, all at once made plain,

plainer than plain, ultimate, beautiful,
serene (worked and reworked, done, undone, cleared),
an appliqué-on-appliqué the fingers
of a boy, seven that winter, seem not to

have enough of, never to have enough of,
never tire of tracing, then retracing,
BM, the circle rounded, BM, BM,
circle reversed, circle rounded, BM,

on and on through a winter afternoon
dazzling with light, with expectation, promise
(the sun makes it seem ice hangs from the trees),
all the way to the Rockaways, beyond,

the Atlantic, still miles south, not yet sighted
(never, perhaps, fable that it is, sighted),
Father and my brother in the front seat,
maps spread between them, views, speed, mileage, motion,

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Mother in fox, the car robe tucked about us,
Claudia Muzio's voice filling the car,
instructing us in some romantic anguish
both unforgettable and undeciphered,

hinted at, dimly glimpsed, not yet spelled out—
music lying in wait for us? the sea
Father insists lies south, due south? one's life?—,
that scene least fathomed, least definitive.

It shall not matter that this is the year
gas is rationed, that pale green books of coupons
are to be surrendered, gallon by gallon,
that station after station has been shuttered,

one by one stricken, mute, the length of Broadway,
toppled by forces (plague? contamination?)
hardly comprehended by a boy, seven;
that chains of mail are strung across each driveway

barring entry to the pumps, to the lifts,
to the depths of those bottomless enclosures
where the dark seems to well at its profoundest,
signs spelling LUBRICATION PITS effaced.

The car fills now with Don José, with Carmen.
Lily Pons breaks the heart, should one permit her.
(One has no qualms whatever acquiescing.)
Mother, in fox, tucks the car robe about me,

gently, securely, softly croons Bizet.
It is both cold and warm here in the car,
the cold explainable, if not the warm.
Mother launches into the Habañera.

Father, it seems, has little taste for opera,
my brother less. I think the route consumes them,
specific routes, specific destinations
("the Rockaways"), mileage, distance, direction,

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the turns to take, not take, marks on the map,
tomorrow visible on the horizon
rather than intimated. It may be
precisely intimation I most savor,

the barely seen, the half-seen, the unseen,
the scene least fathomed, least definitive,
the possible lying in wait, like music,
in a direction neither specified

nor specifiable on the bright map
Father and my brother have spread between them
on the front seat, the glimpse beyond all glimpses,
the note beyond the notes denoting "opera,"

what Puccini, even now, even now,
as we race to the Rockaways, beyond,
a thousand miles from nowhere, drunk on light,
the route at last coming into its own,

worked and reworked, the way cleared, almost cleared,
a whiff of salt, of surf, still in the distance,
one's life lying in wait where a life waits,
has been struggling, throughout, to whisper to us.

(For my part, we need never take the turn,
the route, could all day dawdle, stunned, assailed:
music and light, that year, seem route enough.
One might be quite happy never arriving.)

It is cold in the car, yet we keep warm
in ways not wholly understood, explained.
This is the one afternoon of the week
opera is coming to us from the Met,

Sunday. Rosa Ponselle, this very moment,
the ocean not yet visible, the distance
splendid with prospects hinted at, translates
passion into Italian, lilting, melting,

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joined by Mother who, seated here beside me,
a collar of grey fox framing her face,
the four of us plunging south to the sea,
a mythic, fabled, possible Atlantic,

far from here a war raging, the gas rationed,
station by station shuttered, Broadway darkened,
breaks into the sweetest, purest Italian,
heart-stopping, poignant, lyrical, impassioned,

though we have never heard such language from her,
never known singing to such depth, nor guessed
what splendor she might harbor, what translucence,
though we have known her light in other contexts,

mimics Madame Ponselle, spills with Puccini,
takes up that burden of romantic anguish
as though it were, in fact, hers to take up,
a sponsorship no less mysterious

to Mother, we suspect, than to my brother,
to Father, me, we who accompany her
in search of the Atlantic dumb, astonished,
more moved than, once, we thought we could be moved,

saying nothing, not knowing what to say,
or think, or do, at a loss what to feel,
the weight of all that issues from her awesome,
sumptuous, light-struck, opulent, Italian,

letting the opera spin out as it must,
letting music have its way, as it must,
or as one's life, later in the plot, must,
each element of chance, of choice, of risk,

what Rossini has envisioned as fate,
pursuing us who plunge south where the sea
glitters, refracts, repeats, over and over,
the name, the shape, the scope, of an arrival

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not given us to know, not yet disclosed,
everywhere light assailing us, cascading,
in the car, past it, causeway, bay, surf, beach,
not least the light of that Italian, Sundays,

raining down on Father, my brother, me,
the day cold, more than cold, but, in the back seat,
folded and tucked in lap robes as we are,
deep blue, sea-blue, nuzzled in fox, grey fox,

Madame Ponselle and Mother in full voice,
in fullest voice, at the peak, so to speak,
of their careers, one mezzo soprano
spurring the other on, ablaze, transcendent,

each, for the first time, soaring past her range,
past all ranges, in defiance of limits,
our maps arrayed before us on front seats
offering what Father might call "a view"

(though no map shall avail here, none, I tell you,
no front seat yield the vision, visions, promised,
and the thing Father may have had in mind
by "a view," whatever it may have been—

openings to the sky? the sea? a glimpse,
a half-glimpse, of horizons, destinations?—,
proves, once more, once more, to begin and end here,
here, in the car: one's self, one's self, not more)

one Sunday, many Sundays, of that winter,
the first winter of the war, I am seven,
the day cold, more than cold, the Rockaways
as far, as problematic, as the sea,

that sea Father would have us hold a glimpse of,
if we are to hold anything, light pouring,
Broadway darkened, stations shuttered, gas rationed,
the Italian dense, rich, resplendent, flowing.

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Design

The Machine Age revisited

by William H. Jordy

What is immediately surprising about the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, "The Machine Age in America, 1918-1941," is the title.[1] There is some incongruity in the notion that a period of twenty-three years can encompass an "age." But the events occurring in the interval between the two world wars do indeed constitute the initial phase of a profound shift in American culture in which the machine played a cardinal role as image, process, product, and symbol. For it was during these years that a particular and unique conjunction of circumstances made the machine the principal agent in bringing a *popular* modernism to America. Of course many manifestations of modernism occured prior to 1918, and many more after 1941. But the machine was at the heart of the popular modernism it helped to bring about. For, however important the machine was—as object and icon—to the development of European modernism, its formative role in American modernism was greater. In a sense, we continue to live in the "age" that this machine-centered modernism originated.

"The Machine Age" is an innovative, thought-provoking, and handsome show which brings together many objects that have not been seen before, and certainly not together in one place. It features approximately two hundred and seventy-five items—ranging from a 1929 monoplane and a 1937 Electrolux vacuum cleaner to a Stuart Davis landscape and an Alexander Calder motor-driven mobile. As a whole, the show is meant to illustrate how the machine figured in American painting, sculpture, photography, architecture, decorative arts, fashion, industrial design, and various forms of transportation and communication during this period. Overall, it is a substantial success, although it has its flaws. But then what exhibition of this scope could not be approached in many ways, with critics for all of them?

Exhibitions which celebrate all the visual arts of a period have been very popular lately. Along with the "Machine Age" show, there has been "Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture, and Design" at the Museum of Modern Art and "In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement" at the

1 "The Machine Age in America, 1918-1941" is on view at the Brooklyn Museum through February 16. From there it travels to the Museum of Art at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh (April 4 through June 28), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (August 16 through October 18), and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta (December 1 through February 14, 1988). A book with the same title accompanies the exhibition, written by Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne H. Pilgrim, and Dickran Tashjian (published by the Brooklyn Museum in association with Abrams; 376 pages, over 400 illustrations, $37.50).

This exhibition and catalogue complement "The American Renaissance, 1876-1917," held in 1979 at the Brooklyn Museum. It was organized by Mr. Wilson, Miss Pilgrim, and Richard N. Murray.

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Metropolitan Museum of Art.[2] Surely the prevalence of such exhibitions owes much to the current reorientation of art history, away from a nearly exclusive concern with formal issues, toward more interest in the cultural milieu which art absorbs and influences. It is the nature of objects designed for everyday use to divert one's attention from Parnassus toward the marketplace, from the empyrean toward fashion, from the masterwork toward the cultural context. The popularity of such exhibitions may have practical reasons, too. As the number of art museums grows (and it would seem that no respectable city can any longer be without one—or several), and as the costs and difficulties of borrowing masterworks mount, the underexploited objects in decorative-arts departments attract more attention. Then, too, the growing audience for what latter-day terminology has elevated to the "design arts" may contribute to the trend. Has the collecting of objects ever been more widespread and far-ranging in America? To the "decorative" and "design" arts may be added the exploding world of "collectibles," as it ultimately fans out to the democracy of flea markets and garage sales. All these factors, and doubtless others as well, account for the current spate of exhibitions on artistic episodes where the design arts do as much, or more, to define the creative moment as painting and sculpture.

Exhibitions of this sort pose several problems to their organizers, of which the first for an art museum is how to strike the proper balance between the art and its context. To its credit, the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum attempts to ferret out what is of aesthetic consequence in the machine-inspired images and products of the 1920s and 1930s. The kitsch from the period, which could have been exploited in this show (and was exploited in a flurry of Art Deco shows a few years ago), is mercifully absent. Even a display case of representative plastic jewelry of the later Twenties, covered with the zigzags and geometrized flora associated with Art Deco, reveals discriminating selection. The pursuit of quality is the first obligation of any art museum and, on this score, the Brooklyn show acquits itself handsomely. But the cost is an unintended aura of preciousness about the exhibition, as though the unwanted ghost of past "good design/good form" shows had returned to haunt this one.

This is surprising because the relation between art object and cultural context is better maintained at Brooklyn than at either MOMA or the Metropolitan. At "Vienna 1900," architecture was isolated by the width of the entrance lobby from the rest of the show, and the cultural connections between objects and paintings were not well made. After a few galleries, the objects played themselves out, leaving only more galleries of Schiele, Klimt, and Kokoschka. To present the Viennese painting in this manner appears to have been a deliberate policy; but it gave one the uncomfortable sense that the main show was over. The surplus of painting simply got one to the exit. At the Metropolitan, the Aesthetic Movement was reduced to isolated objects clustered around the diverse sources of influence that account for the movement's very eclectic point of view. But the concern of the Aesthetic Movement was with whole interiors, which were here represented by a few tiny photographs, poorly printed and pasted onto the corners of identifying labels, as though a last-minute improvisation. Moreover, except for a few ornamental details, architecture was virtually unrepresented. The permanent installation of Frank Lloyd Wright's living room for the Francis W. Little house served as the gateway to the exhibition, but it really rebukes Aestheticism,

2 "Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture, and Design" was on display at the Museum of Modern Art from July 3 to October 21. "In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement" was on view at the Metropolitan Museum from October 22 to January 11. Another example of the period exhibition is "Berlin 1900-1933: Architecture and Design," which was at the Cooper-Hewitt from November 4 through January 25, although it did not consider all the arts and its span was not limited to a single movement.

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since Wright strongly opposed the movement's prettiness and eclecticism.

By contrast, the Brooklyn show strikes a much better balance between milieu and object. The objects are grouped around themes, and illuminated by explanatory panels which are conspicuous without being intrusive. The slide-show introduction provides as thoughtful a panorama of the cultural context as one could expect, considering the brisk pace and theatricality of such a multi-projection show, which manipulates images like a magician's deck of cards, with fan-outs, shuffles, cuts, and disappearances into thin air. There is more theater in the simulated radio studio that stands behind a partly cuboid, partly streamlined microphone of the period. Among the audiotaped snippets, the Hindenburg crashes again, the "Shadow knows," "cavalcades" of swing bands romp through the "top ten," Orson Welles's Martians re-invade, Pearl Harbor is bombed, and President Roosevelt ends this phase of the machine age and begins another with his declaration of war. As with the other "cultural-context" exhibitions, a fat book (in lieu of a catalogue) complements the "Machine Age" show, and fills out on the printed page the life-and-times history which only a historical museum can (and should) get away with as an exhibition. Although critical depth is necessarily sacrificed to the sweep of the whole in the bound version of "The Machine Age," the period is admirably surveyed, with penetrating insights along the way and a stunning array of photographs. Altogether the book provides the best available introduction to its subject.

So, with all this effort to take judicious account of the cultural milieu in which the machine age flourished between the two world wars, what accounts for the slightly hermetic aura of the show? It seems that the laudable attempt to prevent documentation from usurping objects, in this instance, has run head-on into the paradox that it is during these two decades that visual documentation itself becomes an art form.

To be sure, the kind of photography which informed the documentarians of the period is beautifully represented in the show. As a group, the machine images of Paul Strand, Charles Sheeler, Edward Steichen, Berenice Abbott, Ralph Steiner, and Margaret Bourke-White (and there are others) shine through as the most substantial achievement of any of the arts actually in the show. Architecture and engineering probably steal the show in the book, only because it uses documentary photographs absent in the exhibition. There, Steichen's great print of the George Washington Bridge, for example, stands as the cardinal photographic image for the suspension bridge. This is not to deny that a few lesser images of suspension bridges by other photographers appear in the show, along with the same theme in other media—notably in the paintings of Joseph Stella and O. Louis Guglielmi, who put the Brooklyn Bridge to nostalgic uses for disparate views of technology as triumph and threat. Equally important are Sheeler's views of River Rouge, and Bourke-White's of machine processes for industry; Thurman Rotan's kaleidoscopic photomural of Rockefeller Center; and Louis Hine's picture of a structural steelworker on the Empire State skeleton, which provides a heroic image at a time when the construction worker as hero was the central icon of the period. However impressive the impact of these images, they epitomize the colossal achievement of the machine age, and the fervor for this achievement, in a fine-toned exquisiteness (which is the other side of their austerity). This accounts substantially for their beauty.

But the consummate exquisiteness of these photographs might have been profitably augmented by the fine work of the documentarians of the period, who recorded the dams for the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Bureau of Reclamation, the great suspension bridges of the period, its highways, skyscrapers, and factories. One hesitates to criticize an art museum for putting objects before documentation in exhibitions of this sort. Nevertheless, where a wide range of artifacts from all the visual arts are

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supposed to call up a period, the discreet use of documentation can enlarge on the meaning of the show. The gold Chrysler Airflow coupe was an excellent example of high-style 1930s streamlining from one of the leading American manufacturers. In looking at this car, however, the viewer wants to know more about other important achievements in American automotive design of the period, the automotive detailing. To have expanded the exhibition in this way would have required the expense of more cars or more photo-documentation. The need is more pressing when it comes to even larger objects, like the little parasol-winged D1-W monoplane (1929) hanging from the ceiling. Although it is a charming piece, it seems to have been chosen more for decoration than substance. On the other hand, no art museum could be reasonably expected to procure a Douglas DC-3 (1936), perhaps the major icon of the streamlining of the period, which became the standard for commercial aviation and for much military aviation during World War II. The DC-3's importance clearly needs stressing in this exhibition, as it is stressed in the book; but only photography could do it.

Similarly, Henry Dreyfuss's refrigerator for General Electric (before 1936) would speak to more effect in the company of a couple of photographs of complete kitchens. (I assume that the reconstruction of a kitchen from the time was not feasible.) And the household objects here, as at the Metropolitan, cry out for views of typical interiors of the period: penthouse modern, movie modern, high-style and low-style suburban modern, classroom modern, cafeteria modern, and so on. Without such augmentation, the object sucks our vision into itself, toward the narcissistic world of "good design/good form." Any art museum can justify this; but the end is narrower than the purported goal of such period exhibitions. In this case, the absence of photo-documentation also eliminates from consideration virtually all the important New York skyscrapers of the late Twenties for which drawings and models have disappeared.

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By now the extraordinary convergence of circumstances which accounted for the popularization of modernism in America are familiar. Ultimately, they all point to the machine as the impetus. In Europe, of course, the machine was utopian with respect to the future, and elitist with respect to the present. In the United States, the machine was omnipresent during the Twenties and Thirties, and there was a popular perception of the benefits to be gained for a society saturated with machines. The coming of popular modernism occurred when the ownership of relatively expensive and complicated machines expanded to the public at large. These included automobiles, radios, home appliances, and the movie projector at the local theater—all machines involved with one's personal and recreational life rather than with one's working day. These machines depended, in turn, on a confluence of developments in the production process: the perfection of the assembly line; the advent of new machines (stamping presses to form huge sheets of metal, extrusion-molding machines to spew forth ribbons in all sorts of materials for protecting seams and for decoration); new materials (plastics, metal alloys, neon, colorful lacquer sprays, and other materials for hard-surface sheen); new variants of old materials (glass, for instance: as a structural material, as block, as inexpensive molding for such items as curved automobile windshields); old materials in cheaper forms (aluminum, chrome); and so on. Along with the potential for the production of consumer goods, an economic and social infrastructure emerged to extend America's faith in the machine: the "time and motion" studies of "scientific management"; the beginnings of modern market research, behavioral psychology, installment buying, planned obsolescence; and the rise of modern advertising, which borrowed from all this innovation, as did the emerging profession of industrial design.

Undergirding these developments, indeed urging them on, was a euphoria about the American future which the machine would bring. Not even the Depression more than dampened this appeal, despite a temporary enthusiasm for subsistence philosophies and a few (really very few) gloomy forecasts for the technological future. It should be remembered that the Tennessee Valley Authority—the greatest utopian enterprise of the Roosevelt administration—used subsistence theory as a part of its rationale. The idea was to build a machine of regional proportions that would run other machines, whether on small farms or in large factories.

It was in the midst of all these developments that those portions of European modernism which were specifically inspired by the machine appeared on the American scene. European modernist movements reached America fully realized. The philosophical wrestlings and acrimonious manifestos were mostly past, even as the utopian visions of the benefits of a machine society were, in the United States, well under way. Thus, European modernism came as a buffet of choices—not quite all at once, but as in one of those feasts in which early dishes are supplemented by later arrivals. First on the table, Cubism, spiced with Futurism and Expressionism. Then, almost simultaneously, curvilinear free form, initially in a native sauce of streamlining; followed quickly by purism as a cleansing sherbet. Never have designers had a richer fare on which to dine, and the cornucopia of possible forms was matched by the cornucopia of production possibilities.

It is one virtue of focusing on the machine as the reigning host for the occasion that all the dishes seem to belong to the same party. Biomorphism, inspired by such artists as Brancusi, Miró, Arp, and Matta, arrived at the very end, as the party was breaking up. Was its appeal to the "organic" theme part of the old party, or was it the start of a new one? In any event, the book for the "The Machine Age" gives more coverage than the exhibition to this late-Thirties biomorphic aspect of machine modernism. Constructivism, which might also have been expected on the menu, was surprisingly missing during this period, both the Russian variety and

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parallel approaches to elemental form in Dutch de Stijl and Neo-Plasticism. The cuisine was mostly French and German.

As the menu has sorted itself out, Art Deco and Streamlined Modern seem to be the major modes within this machine-dominated modernism. Both are fairly recent terms. Art Deco was originally Moderne, or simply Modern, or popularly (later pejoratively) Modernistic, or more idiosyncratically Jazz Modern and Zigzag Modern. Streamline Modern was also once simply Modern, Moderne, or Modernistic; it has recently been awkwardly termed Depression Modern. Between these two modes, and rebuking both for their frivolous acquiescence in consumerism, was the purist or International Style austerity of the Museum of Modern Art as promulgated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson. They publicized their point of view in 1931 with the exhibition "Modern Architecture," and more doctrinairely in a book growing out of the exhibition, *The International Style* (1932). Johnson went on to produce a companion exhibition and catalogue in 1934 on modern product design, *Machine Art*. The memorable cover of *Machine Art*, featuring ball bearings in their roller ring as shining spheres in a shining circle, epitomized the Hitchcock-Johnson point of view. They argued that modern architecture and design should take its cues from the purist forms of geometry—cube, parallelepiped (that is, a rectangular volume or solid), sphere, cylinder, and cone. These were for them the eternally basic and beautiful shapes. One display case in the Brooklyn exhibition enshrines this purist position (so far from Johnson's position today!) with an outboard motor propeller by Alcoa, chemical beakers by Coors Porcelain, a saucepan by Lalance and Grosjean for the Crusader Hotel, and Walter Teague's chunky cylindrical cocktail glasses for Corning (all made between 1930 and 1934). They come straight from the pages of *Machine Art* and are on loan from MOMA. Although MOMA puritanism did not prevail in American design in the Thirties, its neo-Platonic conviction of the ultimate beauty of ideal geometry certainly played a role in the relative austerity of much of the modernism of the Depression years, so different from the energetically angular or languidly undulant ornamentalism of the Art Deco Twenties.

After the many Art Deco exhibitions of a few years ago, it is not surprising that the Brooklyn show should soft-pedal this material. Some flamboyant examples are there, most notably René Chambellan's entrance gates to the executive suite in the Chanin Building (1928): cloud forms and light rays in its grillwork fan out toward garlands of gear wheels (which in earlier Art Deco ornament would typically have been full-faced flowers), and the entire construction bursts upward from a baseline border of stacked coins. But most of the Art Deco on display is more restrained, more geometrical, and already on the verge of metamorphosing toward the severe, abstract objects to come. A translucent vase—all in angles, with what appears to be limpid layerings of pale blue and light green glass (ca. 1928, and probably by Consolidated Lamp and Glass)—is a case in point. The angles of the more energetic Cubism of earlier Art Deco are very much present, but muted in the misty opalescence of the material and quieted by the contained shape. It is much different in feeling from the agitated angularity of Erik Magnussen's silver coffeepot and servers for Gorham (1927), a few of whose triangles are gilded and oxidized to splatter the silver with gold and brown. Even when the Art Deco forms are the simplest geometry, they possess a slightly frenetic quality which becomes untypical for design of the Thirties. In one of Donald Deskey's many table lamps for Deskey-Vollmer (ca. 1927-29), for example, a half circle of chrome metal rises from a curved base to hold the half-spherical chrome lampshade; but the curved support is slightly tapered, and the shapes are set off against one another in a sprightly fashion.

The very title of "The Machine Age" inevitably suggests that the show's climax occurs in work done after 1930. The overt ornamentalism of Art Deco, its frequent illustra-

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tional character, its delight in eccentric shape, its febrile relationships, its oscillation between gaudiness and preciousness in the same piece, its ultimate appeal (even in the big New York skyscrapers of the late Twenties) to craftsmanship rather than technology—all these qualities indicate how far Art Deco is from the machine. In the chapter on design in *The Machine Age,* the change occurs abruptly on page 297, with Russel Wright's cocktail shaker (ca. 1930), a chrome-plated pewter cylinder swollen at its center into a sphere. It is the movement of light around these simple, abstract, impersonal forms, and their proportioning, that energizes the object. The martini is shaken in the belly of the sphere, between hands that grip either end of the cylinder. Although essentially a "decorative gift," the shaker takes its cue from the boldness and simple shapes of the machine as then known, as well as from such metaphors of morality which can be drawn from its spareness, integrity, and functionality. The force of its presence when idle is a gauge of its force when in action. In terms of what modern design meant for the most influential European designers, this is more mature than Art Deco. Indeed, the most puristic products of the Thirties could well have originated in the high-design circles of Europe. One example is Dreyfuss's cylindrical cocktail glasses, although the thickness of the glass—reflecting a greater commitment to design for mass production—may be typically American.

But the specific American qualities of Thirties design appear less in its purist extremes than in its streamlining. Of all the visual modes by which the machine age became manifest at the time, streamlining was the most American. Consider, for example, Kem Weber's armchair (1934) for Lloyd Manufacturing. Like many European chairs of the period, it is two cushioned planes, seat and back (these in black leather), floated between curved arms in chrome-plated metal tubing which rises from sled-runner bases. In the typical streamlined manner, the tubing sweeps up in full curves at the front to make the arms, then tapers back down at the rear to the sled supports, thereby inscribing the shapes of streamlined automobile fenders. Whereas the high-modern European designers would have used one tube for their chair frame, Weber fused three in parallel. By this means he subtly invoked the pizzazz of the parallel banding ("speed lines") on cars and trains. At the climax of the curves, black Bakelite armrests jauntily accent its curvature. The cushions of Weber's chair are fat and low slung, as though a train seat had been crossed with a club chair.

Overall, the Weber chair conveys an image of movement in solid comfort. If in comparison with Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona chair (1929) there is some vulgarization in Weber's piece, there is also an interesting tension in the strangeness of the juxtaposition of the shapes in the chair. The object seems to mediate between what is uncompromisingly abstract and what is flamboyantly metaphoric. The mixed metaphor of solid, stuporous comfort propelled by a phantom jet stream, with the curved arms partaking of both, wins over skepticism, and certainly offers dimensions to design beyond the cool abstraction of high European modernism.

In his more famous, and much more original, Airline Chair of wood (1934-35), Weber daringly reversed the relationship between heavy and light in the visual weights of the support and the seat. Now heavy sculptural arms, in a cantilever construction, support the lightest of bent wood strips covered in Naugahyde, which combine to make the seat and back. The sculptural support recalls nothing so much as an inverted kangaroo's stance, with its potential for bounce: a tapered runner on the floor makes a right-angled curve upward, then curves back and a little down to make the arm. A horizontal bar below the armrest doubles as a narrow shelf for a drink or ashtray.

So the zip of the modern reaches out for mass appeal by promises of comfort and flare. For comfort, psychological as well as physical, contrast the austerity of MOMA's Crusader Hotel saucepans to the user-friendliness of W. Archibald Welden's saucepan

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for Revereware (1934). The cylindrical container for the Crusader saucepan is straight-sided, with a minimal curve from bottom to side; the shorter of the two straight lengths of its abruptly angled handle abuts the cylindrical wall of the pan forthrightly. By contrast, both bottom and lid of the familiar Revereware saucepan emphasize rounded contours. The black plastic pistol-grip handle welcomes the grasp; it is penetrated by the fey ring for hanging, and balanced by the spinning quality of the black knob on the lid. This is a cheerful, comfortable saucepan. If Crusader speaks of haute cuisine, Revereware welcomes Campbell's soup.

The persistence of ornament out of Art Deco into the more severe milieu of Thirties form is apparent in many of the pieces, but subdued. However, it can be overt—in plastic radio cases, for instance, like that by Harold L. Van Doren and J. G. Rideout for Air-King (1930-33). Round-edged, stepped forms—reminiscent of the Twenties set-back skyscraper in New York—frame the box which contains the guts of the machine. This is plain-surfaced, except for a ribbon of pleated verticals streaking across its center and horizontal pleating at the base. The folded surfaces ornament and stabilize the thin shell of material at the same time. Design and structure meet in what appears to be a single stamp of the molding press, which has no need of finishing except for the metal panel clipped across a portion of the vertical pleats. The panel contains stylized Greek warriors controlling zigzag waves, perhaps ancient Air Kings. For those able to make the imaginative leap, their presence transforms the pleating into "fluting"—a touch of class. The design of the housing miniaturizes the modernization of academic architecture during the Thirties.

There is another aspect to this popularized American modernism, and this is a certain prosaic touch to much of the design. It derives in part from a provincial situation where cosmopolitanism is simply not understood, but also from the positive desire to retain an identity with what is simple. The

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wellsprings of this appeal for the simple are deeply rooted in American cultural experience. The plainness of provinciality may be veneered by democratic morality so that it becomes the approved taste. For the specific prelude to the machine-style modern of this exhibition, one thinks perhaps of Paul Strand's photograph, as early as 1915, of a close-packed group of very plain bowls (which is not in the exhibition). The image merited his title, *Abstraction—Bowls*; and it anticipated his close-up photographs of machines. Strand used details of his movie camera and of lathes in a camera shop (1922-23) to suggest much larger machines, or (alternatively) a Cubist-like composition of abstract geometrical form. Morton Schamberg's painting, *Telephone* (1916), was composed in a simplified Cubism that already anticipates Precisionism. In Charles Demuth's *End of the Parade: Coatesville, Pa.* (1920), with its line of smokestacks, and Charles Sheeler's *Church Street El* (1920), is it the Cubism that simplifies and abstracts the objects, or is it the simple objects that make the Cubism so prosaically pristine? Both Demuth and Sheeler moved between folk objects and machines in their paintings. And of course there is in Sheeler's work a play between photography and painting, in which both fluctuate between what is abstract, what literal. The same elegant literalism appears in Gerald Murphy's *Watch* (1925), which assumes a commanding role in the exhibition, and in John Storrs's sculpture, dating back to the early Twenties, where simple combinations of Cubist-inspired shapes possess the laconic character of tools. To conclude the list: there are the more cacophonous aspects of the popular environment in Stuart Davis's painting, and there is the explicit exploitation of the prosaic by Alexander Calder. Most of these works date well before the industrial designers began their simplifications of everyday objects supposedly under the influence of European precedent.

Such deep-rooted appeals in the American experience to the simple, the literal, the prosaic struck a particularly responsive chord in the morality of the Depression. They also played a role in the process by which Americans entered into their own popular version of modernism.

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Dance

Grow old along with me!

by Eva Resnikova

One liability of modern-dance-going is having to watch aging choreographers who are unwilling to accept that their dancing days are over. Martha Graham reluctantly retired from the stage when she was in her late seventies; Merce Cunningham is still putting in appearances at age sixty-seven. It is not mere vanity that keeps these choreographers clinging to their performing careers long after attaining senior-citizen status but the very nature of their art: unlike the classical ballet, the so-called modern dance is predicated upon the rejection of traditional, received vocabularies in favor of highly personalized systems of movement that spring from within the dancer-choreographer's own body. The modern-dance choreographer is by definition the supreme exponent of his or her style; another dancer assuming the choreographer's roles can at best be only a shadow of the original.

Compared with Graham and Cunningham, David Gordon, a first-generation postmodern, is a stripling: he turned fifty last year. Gordon is large, cuddly, dark-bearded, Talmudic. It happens to be a type to which I am partial, and I did not at all mind seeing him put himself through his extremely limited paces, though a younger female colleague of mine found him "old and fat" and couldn't bear to watch. Far more disturbing as a performer was Gordon's wife of twenty-five years, Valda Setterfield: fragile, painfully thin and drawn, with close-cropped silver hair, she looks as if any sudden move might cause her to shatter. In part Setterfield's tentativeness is the legacy of the Royal Ballet-style training she received as a teenager in her native England. Her late start prevented her from acquiring a fully developed classical technique, however, and she was in any case too tall to blend in with a corps de ballet; so she decided to try modern dance and emigrated to New York in the late Fifties.

Gordon grew up on the Lower East Side and studied art at Brooklyn College. A chance meeting with the freewheeling choreographer James Waring led to Gordon's taking his course in dance composition. Setterfield was dancing in Waring's company at the time, and it was there the couple met; they married in 1960. Gordon and Setterfield were present at the creation of the Judson Dance Theater in 1962, Gordon performing two solos that had originated as assignments for Robert Dunn's choreography class at Merce Cunningham's studio. Setterfield became a leading soloist with the Cunningham company for a decade beginning in the mid-Sixties. In 1970, Gordon became a founding member of the improvisational group Grand Union, which combined movement with verbal commentary and music. The group broke up in 1976, and the following year Gordon founded the Pick Up Company, whose name was intended to reflect the transience of its existence: dancers were engaged as needed for the occasional performances that Gordon gave in his downtown loft. He has kept

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the name despite the fact that the company now boasts an impressive board of directors and is comfortably sustained by government funding and corporate grants. He has also fulfilled commissions from modern-dance companies in Europe and, in the United States, from American Ballet Theatre and Dance Theatre of Harlem.

The Pick Up Company that appeared at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival in November consisted of ten dancers in addition to Gordon and Setterfield. The performers' mini-biographies in the playbill reveal that, amazingly, nearly all of them are college graduates—a fact notable not so much for what it tells us about their intellects as for what it tells us about their dancing, namely, that they cannot have had a very serious training. But Gordon's choreography does not require virtuoso technique; he does not even call what he does "choreography," his usual credit reading "Constructed by . . . ." Anti-virtuosity was a tenet of early postmodernism, as articulated by Yvonne Rainer in her famous manifesto ("NO to spectacle no to virtuosity . . ."). In the radical Sixties this often meant nondance performed by nondancers. In the Seventies, choreographers like Lucinda Childs began stylizing and endlessly repeating ordinary movements, as if some hidden meaning would reveal itself if only something were reiterated often enough. Gordon has too highly developed a sense of theater—and humor—to get stuck in this minimalist groove, but he has assumed the methodical, deliberate, uninflected style that went with it, contributing to the ironic tone of his work.

Along with Gordon's popular success and the institutionalization of his company has come the need to accommodate larger audiences, which means he has had to abandon loft spaces for traditional proscenium-arch theaters. Gordon does not pretend to ignore this fact of commercial theatrical life, but neither does he capitulate to it. His reaction in *Transparent Means for Travelling Light*—receiving its New York premiere in Brooklyn—is to deconstruct the theater, exploiting both its possibilities and its limitations. The piece opens with the orchestra pit rising to stage level, bringing with it the cacophony of John Cage's 1942 *Credo in Us,* originally scored for blaring radios and now augmented with TVs, all tuned to different stations. Along for the ride is Gordon, who steps onto the stage and then exits. Later, a pipe lowers from the flies, then rises with a dancer dangling from it. In another section a dropcloth blocks the dancers' lower bodies. At the end, the black wing curtains close in to create a more intimate area in which to contain the final image of Gordon alone against a bright yellow light.

Gordon's use of this early Cage score can be seen as a homage to the avant-garde past (it's somewhat of a shock to realize that Cage has been an *enfant terrible* for forty-five years). But any feelings of nostalgia that threaten to emerge are undercut by the rest of the sound score, which consists of Cage's 1965 *Rozart Mix* and a contemporary piece commissioned from Cage especially for *Transparent Means.* Gordon views his own aging and his relationship with Setterfield in similarly open- and dry-eyed terms. In one section four boys lift and support Setterfield in various configurations. Gordon, who has been waiting in the wings, jogs on and starts pulling one or another of the boys by the arm toward the wings. As soon as Gordon lets go, however, the boy returns to his place in the quintet with Setterfield. This procedure is repeated several times, all in the same matter-of-fact, deadpan manner. There is no sense of urgency or hostility; on failing to succeed, Gordon patiently repeats his actions.

It's a funny routine, the comic absurdity heightened by the ridiculous unisex costumes, including garter belts holding up ragged hose, which make Gordon, with his beard and belly, appear silliest of all. But there are also serious implications, concerning his role as choreographer. The critic Marcia Siegel, describing the personal styles of the six Grand Union members in a 1975 review, wrote: "David Gordon does a lot of the talking, masterminding, cracking jokes,

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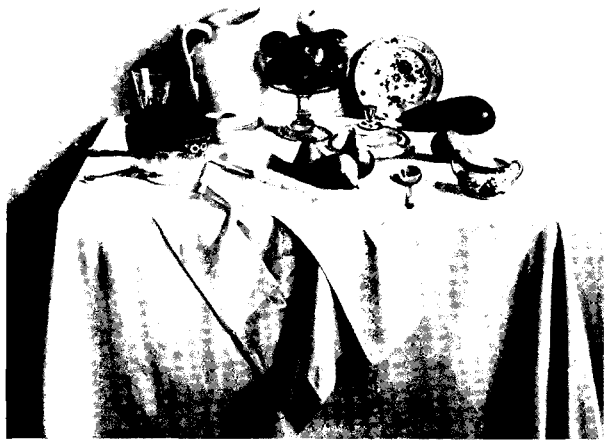

Festive Table, 1986
Oil on canvas, 52 x 52 inches

Robert Schoelkopf Gallery *50 W 57 NY 10019*

and commenting on how things are going. He seems to want to control events, but he gives in when the events take over." She could have been describing *Transparent Means for Travelling Light,* only the jokes and comments are no longer verbal. An undercurrent of sexual jealousy is also evident, since Gordon is presumably physically incapable of lifting Setterfield as the younger men do. Later, Gordon and Setterfield dance a tender, low-key duet at the back of the stage while two young couples perform a more flashy dance toward the front.

At the beginning of the piece, the stage is lit so that the right half is bright yellow and the left is plunged into darkness. A male dancer ambles from right to left, but as soon as he hits the dividing line he is thrown violently to the ground. Undaunted, he repeats his attempt to cross the stage several times, refusing to learn from his painful experience and maintaining a touching hope in the face of all evidence to the contrary: an absurdist slapstick image straight out of Samuel Beckett. Setterfield appears, the light evens out, and another boy is able to cross the stage with no difficulty. In an interview in the Next Wave Festival program booklet, Gordon explains that he began with the image of a dancer being knocked down, then came up with the idea of a "wall of darkness." Next he brought on another dancer, who did not have this problem. Finally, he introduced Setterfield between them, and realized, "Ah, Valda brings the light with her." It's evident that Gordon sees Setterfield as a beneficent presence that softens life's blows.

The second piece on the program, *My Folks,* is intended as an affectionate tribute to Lower East Side Jewish immigrant life, set to taped music provided by a klezmer band. In nineteenth-century Eastern Europe these groups of itinerant musicians would travel from shtetl to shtetl to provide the entertainment at bar mitzvahs and weddings. The music, with its syncopations, "blues" notes, and improvisation, has much in common with jazz. Gordon has not attempted to

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re-create authentic Hasidic dance—for one thing, this would preclude any mingling of the sexes. But there are allusions to it, for instance, in the uplifted arms and gentle rocking motions. Gordon again casts himself as the outsider, opening the piece alone and wandering in and out of the action. He is also the only character in authentic dress, though the women are in vaguely ethnic turn-of-the-century costume.

A major presence in *My Folks* is the rectangular pieces of red-and-black-striped fabric that are manipulated by the dancers (a homage to relatives in the shmata business?). The work opens with a procession reminiscent of Loring's *Billy the Kid,* with its pioneers slowly, deliberately making their way from one side of the stage to the other, ever westward. In *Folks* the dancers form what appears to be a never-ending moving banner of fabric across the front of the stage. Later, some of the dancers assume various positions on the fabric while others drag them slowly across the stage, intimating the emotional aspects of the immigrant experience, separation and loneliness, rather than the more often depicted crowding that steerage physically entailed. At the end of this section, Gordon, with typical self-deprecating humor and a mischievous grin, has one of the female dancers attempt, with obvious difficulty, to tow his own ample frame. (The device of pulling a dancer on a piece of fabric goes back to the grand pas de deux in the original *Nutcracker* of 1892, though there it was by necessity an illusionist trick—the ballerina was poised on pointe—that made use of a track built into the stage.)

Valda Setterfield, prominently featured, stands out as an obvious shiksa, somehow seeming even more miscast than the lone black dancer, who at least is a member of some oppressed minority.

The Seasons, receiving its premiere in Brooklyn, is a takeoff on a stock ballet divertissement. It is prefaced by a witty monologue spoken offstage on tape by Setterfield that gives a highly personal, urban view of the subject, extolling the virtues of air-conditioning, complaining about mosquitoes, finding spring the most depressing season of all because it reminds her that she will never have another child. The score is a collage assembled by Chuck Hammer of music on seasonal themes, from Frank Sinatra crooning "Autumn in New York" to the Vivaldi and Glazunov *Seasons* to Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 1 ("Winter Dreams"). It's a good concept, poorly executed, with its snippets fading in and out, overlapping, and distorted with noise, like a bad shortwave radio transmission. The idea seemed to be to allow us to hear only enough of each piece to get the joke; but the work would have benefited from a real musical accompaniment.

Gordon's *Seasons* begins with summer, the dancers, dressed in Santo Loquasto's white updated ballet dress—Setterfield, as prima, has a more elaborate costume—basking in the sun on what one imagines to be an urban rooftop as the Lovin' Spoonful sings "Summer in the City." Changes in season are announced by the arrival of a dancer with an appropriately colored piece of chiffon placed over the white costume (green for spring, etc.). This is a gloss on naïve nineteenth-century Russian ballet costuming, whose conventions dictated a basic tutu whose decoration would signal to the audience the character the dancer was supposed to be portraying—clusters of grapes in the autumn section of Petipa's *Les Saisons,* for instance, indicating that the ballerina was meant to be a bacchante.

In the winter section, Gordon enters dressed in a wedding-cake costume matching Setterfield's that, with its long tunic and leggings, and with Gordon's girth and facial hair, summons up images of photos of the fifty-year-old Pavel Gerdt at the Maryinsky in the 1890s. (It was because of his advanced age that the pas de deux of the 1895 *Swan Lake* was turned into a pas de trois: he could not lift the ballerina and so another danseur, in the guise of Benno, the prince's friend, was introduced to perform the more strenuous aspects of the partnering.) Gordon knows his ballet history, and

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it's quite possible that the reference is intentional.

Gordon and Setterfield perform a subdued pas de deux as snatches of exuberant waltzes from Meyerbeer's *Les Patineurs* are heard in the background. They tentatively pick their way together around the stage, one step at a time, as if trying to avoid slipping on ice, in a winter journey that brings to mind Clara's trip with the Nutcracker Prince to the magical realm of the Sugar Plum Fairy, and Prince Désiré's voyage with the Lilac Fairy to Aurora's enchanted castle.

David Gordon's program at the Brooklyn Academy is more interesting to think about than it was to watch, more fun in retrospect than it was in actuality. The usual postmodern longueurs were not as hard to take in *My Folks,* where at least the music was always diverting; but they were excruciating in the other two pieces, with their intensely annoying noise scores. Despite Gordon's maturity, intelligence, and humor, his works ultimately succumb to the same ills as those of his younger, less talented colleagues—over-lengthiness and self-indulgence—leading one to conclude that these qualities are endemic to the form. At least by showcasing his wife rather than himself Gordon has avoided the unmitigated egotism that is the pitfall of so many modern-dance choreographer-dancers—at the expense, however, of running a serious risk of uxoriousness.

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Art

Homer and Sargent: Yankee honesty vs. cosmopolitan flair

by Eric Gibson

The pull of Europe has been from the beginning one of the enduring forces in American art. American artists have travelled to Europe, or otherwise availed themselves of its resources, to help overcome feelings of cultural insufficiency. Europe's past, with its great artistic traditions, as well as certain elements in the contemporary life of art, served as a model and an inspiration for artists who felt that their native culture lacked the requisite weight and resonance. This, at least, was a common attitude from colonial times through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, when the artistic innovations of the European avant-garde replaced the appeal of tradition as the principal reason for looking to Europe for leadership.

But there were always American artists who had a very different view. For them the artist's task was to reveal and celebrate what was genuinely American about American life, and to do so in terms thought to be free of foreign influence. In the eyes of these artists, a certain lack of international sophistication was regarded as a virtue, a sure sign that they were on the right track. Europe, in their view, was to be shunned, or at least not abjectly surrendered to, for the very cosmopolitanism which was the hallmark of continental experience was looked upon as a barrier to what was genuine in the native spirit.

We were given yet another reminder of this historic dualism this season in the ambitious exhibitions devoted to Winslow Homer and John Singer Sargent. The Homer exhibition at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven focused on the artist's watercolors—commonly thought to be his most important achievement. The Sargent exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York was a more elaborate affair, assembling paintings, drawings, and watercolors from all phases of the artist's career in a retrospective that coincided with the publication of a new biography of the artist.[1]

Homer and Sargent: both in some sense American classics, yet they seem to belong to different cultures. About the only thing they had in common was the friendship of Edwin Austin Abbey, a minor academic painter of the period. Homer was the quint-

1 "Winslow Homer Watercolors" began at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in March of 1986. From there it travelled to the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth before arriving at the Yale University Art Gallery (Sept. 11-Nov. 2). The show was organized by Helen A. Cooper of the Yale University Art Gallery, who also wrote the catalogue (Yale University Press, 259 pages, $39.95). "John Singer Sargent"—which will be at the Art Institute of Chicago from February 7 to April 19—was on view at the Whitney Museum from October 7 to January 4, 1987. The curator of the exhibition was Patricia Hills; the catalogue was published by the Whitney in association with Harry N. Abrams (295 pages, $40).

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essential Yankee solitary. He became increasingly reclusive throughout his life and was self-sufficient to the point of being all but self-taught in one medium, oil, and entirely so in another, watercolor. As is often the case with such American loners, he was deeply involved with nature as a subject —and nature for Homer meant the look and feel of the seacoast and the countryside where he could depict its invigorating beauties as well as its dark undercurrents of risk and wantonness.

Sargent, on the other hand, stands as the archetype of the cosmopolitan American, a Jamesian figure, almost a dandy, who moved easily in the world of salons and drawing rooms of upper-class society on both sides of the Atlantic, painting commissioned portraits of its leading personalities in a style that completely satisfied their vanity and self-esteem. When Sargent turned to nature, as he sometimes did, he was an artist on holiday, and his work shows it.

In one respect, the Homer show at Yale seemed to be too much of a good thing. We were given over one hundred examples hung so closely together and so saturating our vision that at times one felt the artist was in danger of slipping away altogether. This is not really the way to exhibit such watercolors, which are small, intimate works that need to be lingered over if their special qualities—especially their note of pervasive and uncompromised honesty—are to be fully savored. One feels in Homer's watercolors that on every level the artist has contrived to speak with nothing—no hint of a mannerism or a convention—interposing itself between him and the viewer. Homer's honesty makes itself felt in the unaffected emotional tone of the watercolors, particularly those of the 1870s dealing with youthful pursuits on farms and at sea. Their strength is in their fidelity to sensory experience, and in the growing link, as the artist achieves greater mastery of his medium, between freedom of handling and convincing narrative immediacy. We are struck by the exquisite sense of touch, the feeling of paint delicately floated across the paper surface, dabbed on, scraped, or sponged. Such works do not lend themselves to a large-scale presentation. No doubt the Yale show was a success as an exercise in Homer scholarship, but as an aesthetic experience one left the exhibition wishing that it had been concentrated on fewer examples. There is simply no way that an artist like Homer—especially the Homer of the watercolors—can be made to look "big" in the purely physical sense. This is surely an instance of the museum's needs overriding the pleasures and interests of the viewer.

Studying the Homer exhibition at Yale—even among the jostling crowds it attracted —one was again made to realize how thoroughly watercolor transformed his art. What the new medium offered Homer was a range of effects—light, color, a new freedom of touch—which grew out of his previous work in oil but which so extended it as to entirely reshape his art. The difference between *Breezing Up,* an 1876 oil of boys out sailing, and *Sailing the Catboat,* its watercolor study, can be seen in the way the latter all but subsumes form to light and color, and infuses the depicted incident with a feeling of momentum that the weightier oil can only imply.

Homer's work was able to develop the way it did in large measure because of the very nature of the watercolor medium. It was portable, which meant that he could travel to a given location and with a few rapid strokes lay in the essentials of an image and finish it on the spot without having to make revisions in the studio. The thin, fluid washes lent themselves to the depiction of light and its agent color—and to a freedom of handling perfectly suited to rendering rapidly shifting masses—in a way that was not possible in oil, at least for Homer.

But it is not only the nature of the medium that explains Homer's achievements in watercolor. No earlier practitioner had moved the medium so decisively free of its traditional allegiances—to oil painting on the one hand, to illustration on the other—and into a territory of its own. To be sure, Homer was aided by a changing artistic cli-

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mate, a climate that he helped to bring about. At the time he took up the medium, in the early 1870s, watercolor was beginning to be regarded as more or less equal to oil paint. Indeed, Homer's own adoption of watercolor was precipitated by a large international exhibition of watercolors in New York in 1873, the first exhibition of its kind and itself a measure of the medium's new status among artists and the public. And although viewers eventually reconciled themselves to the apparent lack of finish in Homer's watercolors—a repeated criticism of his early exhibitions—this reconciliation coincided with the rise of Impressionism in America, itself characterized by an approach to paint handling and the observed world that paralleled Homer's.

True to the native strain in American art, Homer felt no compelling urge to cross the Atlantic. He did travel to Europe, but never in the role of a votary. His first visit was in 1866, seven years before he took up watercolor seriously. While in Paris, where he had gone to see two of his paintings in the American section of the Universal Exposition, he saw a good deal of work by the Barbizon school and Millet, with whose paintings he was already somewhat familiar from American collections. Although some of Homer's paintings executed in France reveal a modest debt to Millet, the French painter seems to have had no immediate impact on his work.

In 1881, he went again to Europe, and this trip was to have far more dramatic effects. After briefly stopping in London, Homer travelled to Cullercoats, a small fishing village on the North Sea. He intended to spend only the summer there, but he remained for eighteen months.

A decisive shift occurs in the tone of Homer's art at Cullercoats. His theme there is man in contact with the elements, as it had been in Gloucester the previous year, when he had gone to another coastal village for the subjects it offered. But in Gloucester the marine subject stands among many others; in Cullercoats it stands alone, and it is handled far differently.

At Cullercoats it is the dark side of man's encounter with nature that engages Homer. His subjects are the men and women who earn their living fishing the waters offshore, who must brave the raw power of nature for their livelihoods. Many of his images depict men and women—especially women—waiting apprehensively for news (or sight) of a friend or loved one. At Cullercoats, Homer shows the encounter with nature in its starkest aspect: as a matter of dangers, risks, costs. In the process his subjects transcend mere genre to stand as a vision of elemental struggle on an almost allegorical level.

There has always been, in Homer's art, a certain impulse to allegory, since his genre pictures tend to go beyond the particular incidents of everyday life and speak of broader concerns. For example, his early pictures of children, besides capturing in paint a Tom Sawyer world of youthful energy and spirit, celebrate and lament the precious, transient state of childhood innocence. It was in part this broader current that steered Homer's art clear of that dread fate of native American art: parochialism. For it subtly elevated common incident to the level of universal experience.

Prior to working at Cullercoats, however, Homer's allegorical interests had remained below the surface, something implied, perhaps, but not fully stated. At Cullercoats this changes. The allegorical aspect of Homer's art plays a more prominent role. This new emphasis derives in part from the circumstances of the village life he found there. There was the ferocity of the North Sea and the harshness of the climate, both unlike anything he had encountered before. And there was the strong sense of fate, a recurring strain in Homer's art, as forces beyond the fishermen's control brought them into dramatic confrontation with the elements.

Clearly all of this cast a spell on Homer's imagination. In the watercolors he simplifies his pictures, eliminating extraneous incident and anecdote, and giving maximum focus to the drama. He also limits his compositions to a few participants and suppresses detail.

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It is principally through his images of women that he communicates the stark drama of the villagers' lives. The fishermen's wives played an important part in the community, not only as wives and mothers but as vendors who spent their days selling what their husbands had brought in at dawn from a night's work. These are robust, hardy women, physically and emotionally equipped for the arduous life they lead. On a narrative level we see events through their eyes, as they watch and wait and work. They function, silently, as a sort of Greek chorus, revealing action and giving perspective to the drama as it unfolds. Formally, Homer reaches back fifteen years to draw on what he learned from Millet's hefty peasants; and he weds this knowledge to his already substantial figural idiom to produce people who embody the necessary virtues of fortitude and reliability.

In the watercolors of Cullercoats, Homer's figures approach the monumental. The women in particular undergo a thorough change of identity, moving from the delicate, Victorian child-women of his earlier work to become large, symbolic figures. At times they even achieve a kind of apotheosis, and never more evidently than in *Looking over the Cliff* (1881), which shows two women looking down from a cliff edge. No other physical reference point is visible in the painting: silhouetted against the sky, the women are elevated above the mundane and benignly survey the scene below.

The figures in *Looking over the Cliff* are detached in a way that is new for Homer. An earlier work like *Sailing the Catboat* (1875) communicates no feeling of physical weight; everything is dissolved by light and watercolor wash. Not so in the Cullercoats works, where the women seem to occupy space and respond to gravity as nothing else in the pictures possibly can. In *Looking over the Cliff* the detachment comes from the figures' physical bulk; they have a weightiness to them which makes itself felt in contradistinction to their surroundings. Here a physical attribute reads as a metaphor for strength

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of character and the role it is called upon to play in the community.

The women in the Cullercoats watercolors are detached psychologically as well. All Homer's figures possess this quality to some extent, of course. It is one of the striking characteristics of his work that once you penetrate the felicities of light you reach figures in isolation from one another. (This isolation prefigures a condition more explicitly expressed in Edward Hopper's work.) Homer's Cullercoats women are not so much isolated as removed from the action around them. Where the figures in the earlier pictures for the most part look downward or into the picture space, caught up in its narrative flow, these women cast their eyes in a direction that leads us out of the picture and away from its action.

The work Homer did at Cullercoats marks a dark apogee in his oeuvre, one he never again aspired to or attained. Aside from a small group of watercolors executed at Prout's Neck, after his return from England he turns away from the subject of the sea's raw power and its effects on the people who must face it. Nature reacquires its bracing, beneficent character—for example, in his pictures of the brilliant, sun-drenched lushness of the Caribbean.

In reacting to the world of Cullercoats as he did, and in allowing his art to be carried into new realms by what he found there, Homer was responding to a foreign stimulus in a manner far different from most American artists. Indeed, he represents a reversal of the historic orientation of American artists toward Europe. For Americans generally, the pull of the Continent was the pull of art, the pull of culture, that magical ingredient unavailable at home which, it was thought, would help them transform their native scene into art. But Homer never travelled to Europe for "culture" in that sense, and he made only limited use of it in his work. What held him at Cullercoats was what had fed his work back home—nature. Cullercoats differed from Gloucester and Prout's Neck only in that it provided in greater measure what Homer had constantly sought, and found, elsewhere, namely the vital interaction of man with the elements. Thus Europe represented for him not an alternative to the aesthetic status quo but an extension, an intensification of it.

John Singer Sargent presents a very different case. He did not emigrate to Europe but was born and raised there by expatriate American parents, returning to his "native" country for any length of time only when he was in his thirties. So Sargent began life with an unorthodox notion of what constituted "home turf." For him, the foreign milieu was home, while his native country was relegated to the category of "the other."

The unconventional nature of Sargent's expatriation was the precondition of a style of life that did much to shape his outlook on life and art. Seeking relief from assorted imaginary maladies, his parents maintained a continuous itinerancy through the spas and cities of Europe. The family never stayed long enough in one place to put down roots. In addition, the myth of illness, with its attendant obligations of nursing and inactivity, acted like a magnet on the family, pulling them all in together and working against meaningful contact with the world beyond. As a result of this state of perpetual motion, Sargent received no formal schooling but rather what Stanley Olson, his most recent biographer, refers to as a "Baedeker education"—that is, he acquired a familiarity with languages and monuments in various countries as well as a substantial literary background, but all on his own and in a highly unsystematic fashion.[2]

Sargent's rarified contact with the outside world affected him in important ways. His world became almost entirely aesthetic in character, not only in the large roles he assigned to culture and manners but also in his sense of life's physical aspect. For Sargent, reality was a succession of constantly changing backdrops, a world in which appearances counted for everything.

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2 *John Singer Sargent: His Portrait,* by Stanley Olson; St. Martin's Press, 352 pages, $16.95.

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When education finally did come Sargent's way, in the form of his enrollment in the atelier of the fashionable society portraitist Émile Auguste Carolus-Duran in 1874, it served to intensify his aesthetic orientation. Carolus's method was his own version of the painterly painting of Velázquez and Frans Hals. He taught tonal painting—the developing of forms in terms of graded color values rather than chiaroscuro—and instructed his students to paint directly on the canvas, without the aid of preliminary drawings. What is more, he placed great emphasis on painterly effect, urging his students to paint into still wet paint and, at the end of their work on a picture, to add strategically placed, "spontaneous" flourishes to make it appear as though the work had been done with ease and gusto.

Everything about Carolus's method, to which Sargent avidly responded, worked to remove Sargent's art from any grounding in authentic experience and to erect a barrier of art-historical models and gratuitous effects between the artist and his sensibility. One has only to think of Eakins, scrupulously using drawing and construction to mediate his experience of reality with the imperatives of art—or of Homer, who was engaged in his first empirical probings in watercolor at this time—to understand by contrast what sort of artistic outlook Sargent acquired in Paris.

The strongly aesthetic basis of Sargent's art is what accounts for the impression of shallowness his paintings give us today, and the enervating effect they have on us when they are assembled in quantity. From the moment we step off the elevator at the Whitney Museum and confront, in an array of four life-sized paintings, the entire Pailleron family as well as Sargent's portrait of Carolus-Duran himself, exhaustion sets in as we find ourselves forced to submit to one "performance" after another. The performance in question, of course, is a double bill consisting of the artist, playing to the gallery, and to his co-star the sitter, whose chief concern it is to project the proper degree of patrician authority, insouciance,

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and sophistication. In all but a few of Sargent's paintings the line between portraiture and posturing is almost nonexistent.

The Whitney retrospective offered us more than Sargent's portraits, but the pictures devoted to other subjects were for the most part so uninteresting and in some cases so poor—so cloying and banal in their attempt to mimic some of the more advanced idioms of the day—that they really didn't belong in a serious museum show at all. The most glaring examples, of course, were to be found in Sargent's so-called "impressionist" phase, when he seems to have seized upon the weakest aspects of Renoir and Mary Cassatt while remaining oblivious to their strengths. Since such pictures are commonly—and correctly—omitted from most Sargent exhibitions, we naturally wonder why they have been dusted off for this occasion. Tom Armstrong, the director of the Whitney, was nothing if not forthcoming in explaining what the museum had in mind. In his foreword to the catalogue, Mr. Armstrong speaks of "Sargent's highly expressive manner and his treatment of subject matter and narrative content, all of which are of great interest to contemporary artists." In a context that seeks to demonstrate some implicit connection between Sargent and, say, Eric Fischl, we can be sure that aesthetic quality is not going to be a paramount concern, and in this exhibition it wasn't.

The few Sargent pictures in the show that really hold us are those portraits in which we sense a complex and subtle sort of collaboration between artist and model, where something has engaged the artist on some deeper level and has had the effect of shifting the focus momentarily away from his overpowering mannerisms.

One such work is the celebrated portrait of Virginie Gautreau (christened *Madame X*) that Sargent executed in 1884. Sargent had met her three years before and was struck by her idiosyncratic beauty. (She took steps to enhance her good looks by rouging her ears and heavily powdering herself. Along with small doses of arsenic, the powder had the effect of turning her flesh a deathly white.) Sargent wanted to paint her so much that he enjoined his friends to intercede on his behalf. For her part, a portrait must have seemed the ideal vehicle to win over a skeptical Parisian society.

In the finished work we are given at once a haughty and inviting individual, one who projects both coldness and warmth. Sargent's desire to convey these attributes, as well as his fascination with his sitter's physical aspect, led him to reverse his normal method, suppressing painterliness in favor of an unusually austere manner. The eerie pallor of Madame Gautreau's skin, and her hard, clear profile, focused Sargent's gifts as they were never to be focused again.

In the majority of Sargent's portraits his strongly aesthetic orientation—the emphasis on style and historical reference—combines with the superficial "society" aspects of his clientele to drain his subjects of substance, both material and psychological. The sitter is thus transformed under Sargent's fluent, ingratiating hand into a social icon, the mere idea of a social type. The principal agent of this transformation is, of course, his vaunted brushwork, which expresses everything in terms of shimmer, of material and social aura.

Sargent paid a price for his manner, his fluency, and his success. His clients came to expect a certain type of portrait from him, leaving room for little more than token deviation on his part. Indeed, the history of *Madame X* is, among other things, the history of the kind of disaster that could befall Sargent when he departed from formula. The work caused a scandal at the 1884 Salon for its forthright eroticism and its failure to provide the required level of flattery. Sargent was in effect run out of Paris. After *Madame X,* when he moved to England and gradually found new sitters there and in America, any adjustments to his style took place *within* the accepted portrait style. Having once come to grief trying to straddle official and advanced tastes, he was not about to risk catastrophe a second time. Hence his gradual elimination, after leaving Paris, of some of the more objectionable "French" painterly

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mannerisms—objectionable, that is, to prospective English clients who wanted from him what they could construe as a modern approximation of the grand manner of Van Dyck and Gainsborough.

It is in this context of formula that one needs to see the failure of the "impressionist" phase of Sargent's career. Sargent's shift from portraiture to *plein air* painting suggests a desire to adopt an aesthetic based on immediate experience in place of one based on formulas—in order to reclaim some vestige of authenticity in his art. Yet he was unable to effect this transition with any degree of success. What pervades his "impressionist" painting is the persistence of a notion of what the world is *supposed* to look like, rather than its aspect as revealed through direct observation. Sargent could not overcome lifelong habit, could not abandon the dominance of mind and rely solely on what he saw before him. His repeated use of black, his resort to chiaroscuro modeling in, say, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* (1885-86), his harsh coloring, which seems more than anything else a desire to "match" what he knew from true Impressionist painting—all point to a reluctance to abandon the realm of the known and restrict himself to the shifting world of optical appearances. Moreover, his brushstroke is but a variation on the fluid manner he learned under Carolus-Duran and is derived from a similar surface-covering impulse rather than from a desire to re-create the optical shimmer of the observed world. The whole Impressionist logic of discovering the world anew was alien to Sargent, and he responded to its challenge by falling back upon the world as it was already known to him.

In this sense Sargent was a prisoner of his art, and his predicament casts new light on the conventional wisdom about the homely, constricted world view of the native artist and the loftier outlook of the expatriate. Winslow Homer, the native, enriched his art through attaching local subject matter to deeper themes, and by giving priority to first-hand experience. Sargent, the cosmopolitan, lived in a double condition of exile. First he was denied any definitive notion of native roots and the sure sense of identity that such a notion gives. And then, too, in the constant hewing to accepted taste, he trapped himself in a world far removed from the best impulses of his truly artistic sensibility. This internal exile is crystallized in his 1886 self-portrait. Its diminutive size—in relation to the scale he usually gave his subjects—speaks volumes.

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Books

The golden boy of Surrealism

by Renee Winegarten

If you look at the photograph of leading Surrealist artists and writers, taken in 1932 at Tristan Tzara's, you will find René Crevel in the back row, and that is where he long remained. The others, including André Breton, Salvador Dali, and Paul Eluard, all seem to know what to do with their hands, whereas René Crevel is leaning forward, one hand placed for support on the shoulder of Max Ernst, the other on that of Man Ray. Born in 1900, the golden boy of the Surrealist movement, Crevel is perhaps remembered more for having killed himself than for his writings, though even in death he is surpassed by other suicides, by the revolver-brandishing Jacques Vaché, for instance, whose myth was sedulously fostered by André Breton. Why, then, has David Rattray chosen to publish now a translation of Crevel's autobiographical novel, *La Mort difficile*, sixty years after its first appearance in 1926?[1] The answer to that question may well have as much to do with a certain climate of opinion that has flourished since the Sixties as with Crevel's undoubted talent as a writer.

It was in 1947 that Jean-Paul Sartre accused the Surrealists, who deeply influenced him, of being young men of good social position who were hostile to daddy. Crevel senior, however, hanged himself in 1914, and his young son was left under the domination of a mother he loathed and who is caricatured as the odious and pretentious Mme. Dumont-Dufour in *La Mort difficile.* Still, unlike many of the budding Surrealists in the Twenties, Crevel was indeed well-to-do and well connected. He was a great friend of the Vicomte Charles de Noailles and his wife Marie-Laure, who financed the notorious film, *L'Âge d'or*, by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali; and it was he who introduced the inventor of limp watches to one of the earliest of that artist's princely patrons.

Crevel appears indubitably handsome in the portrait photograph by Man Ray, and in fine line drawings of the period. His looks were of a type that should have given him a role in one of Cocteau's later films, had he survived and if Breton and Cocteau had not been at daggers drawn. One of Crevel's friends, the Surrealists' ally, André Thirion, remarked in his memoirs on the engaging personality and polished charm of the author of *La Mort difficile.* André Breton's portrait of his associate is more somber: it stresses the disquiet and the complexity of the young man's character.

In his books Crevel made no secret of his homosexuality or bisexuality. As for Breton, he wrote paeans to heterosexual love, and like most of the Surrealists he viewed homosexuality with disfavor, although the colleagues tolerated what they regarded as an aberration in their friend. It is plain from Crevel's highly personal narrative, *Mon Corps et moi* ("My Body and Me"), that the

1 *Difficult Death,* by René Crevel. North Point Press, 135 pages, $11.95.

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young author felt deeply divided about his sexual proclivities. Moreover, he had long suffered from ill health: tuberculosis took him at frequent intervals to boredom in Swiss sanatoria, and his sickness was complicated by alcohol and drugs (opium, cocaine). The theme of suicide haunted him. In his very first book, *Détours* (1924), he imagined the scenario of death by gas that he was to follow eleven years later in 1935. With *Mon Corps et moi*, he betrays his doubts about the reality of his own existence.

The great event of Crevel's life was his meeting with André Breton in 1921: a strong, aggressive character under whose aegis the Surrealist enterprise often appears as a succession of insults, cuffs to celebrated heads, and expulsions. Crevel made an important contribution to the movement and yet he also figures as its victim. Having been initiated into spiritualism by an aristocratic English lady, he introduced Breton to "hypnotic sleep," which played so large a role in the development of Surrealism and its use of automatic writing or image-making. In a deep sleep, Crevel declaimed, sang, yet apparently he had no memory of what had passed. These experiments led the young writer to try to hang himself, and Breton put an end to them. In the famous "Inquiry into Suicide," conducted by *La Révolution surréaliste*, Crevel eloquently justified suicide as a solution to his dissatisfaction with his life.

The risks involved in Surrealist practices, such as the debate on suicide and the rehabilitation and simulation of madness, are obvious. The extravagant declarations of Breton—that "living and not-living are imaginary solutions," or that the distinction between true and false, good and evil, is "absurd"—must have had a harmful effect on one like Crevel, whose hold on life was so precarious. The whole objective of Surrealism was to undermine reason and logic. Crevel could write a book paradoxically entitled *L'Esprit contre la raison* ("Mind against Reason"), but he valued highly his own critical intelligence and, having worked on a thesis on Diderot while at the Sorbonne, he never lost interest in the eighteenth century as the age of enlightenment.

Meanwhile, profoundly loyal to André Breton, he was among those who "gave proof of ABSOLUTE SURREALISM," as Breton's first Manifesto has it. Only too well known is Breton's concept of absolute Surrealist revolt: to go down into the street with a revolver and to fire haphazardly into the crowd. Time and experience have not been kind to such irresponsible language, and too much real blood has been shed in the streets for Breton's words to be regarded as mere ink. One difference between words and paint is that words have meaning and, however "poetic," cannot be totally divorced from reason and logic. Perhaps that is why some Surrealist art tends to make a greater impact than a good deal of strictly Surrealist literature. Certainly, the confusion in Crevel's mind between unreason and reason must have been acute.

A way out of the impasse appeared to be at hand for intellectuals in revolt: adherence to the Revolution and membership in the Communist Party. Crevel discovered Marx and dialectical materialism, and he began to quote chunks from Engels and Lenin in his writings. He was among those who wrote for the periodical *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, doubtless believing with Breton that to propagate the idea of revolution would hasten the advent of the great cataclysm. In 1927 the author of *La Mort difficile* joined the French Communist Party; he was expelled in 1933 and readmitted in 1934. None worked harder than he did to try to reconcile the mistrustful party hacks and the would-be revolutionary Surrealists or, as it was then put more grandly, "Communism and Culture." His efforts to establish harmony during the preparations for the Communist-inspired First International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture in 1935 were thwarted by the exchange of insults and slaps between Ilya Ehrenburg and André Breton, which led to the author of the Surrealist Manifestos being denied permission to speak. This Congress proved to be one of the early successes of Stalinism

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in the international cultural sphere. There was in fact no way of reconciling such fundamentally opposing attitudes to free thought and free expression.

Crevel's failure to secure agreement between Surrealists and Communists is thought to be one contributing cause of his suicide. Shortly before his death, the former Communist André Thirion had expounded privately—much to Crevel's surprise—his own conviction that Stalin represented as much of a threat to culture as Hitler. When Crevel stayed with Dali at his home at Port-Lligat, the painter could not have been very helpful when employing his "paranoia-criticism" to provoke "the maximum number of hopeless antagonisms in every situation." Meanwhile, Crevel was becoming more critical of André Breton, and was losing faith in Surrealism, as his letters to Tristan Tzara of 1934-35 reveal. An adverse medical report prompted the young novelist to write: "Please have my body cremated. Disgust," and to take his own life.

There is a certain irony in prefacing *Difficult Death* with Dali's memoir of 1954, as David Rattray has done. Crevel would have hated Dali's support for General Franco: he himself was keenly opposed to fascism, having helped to create a committee of anti-fascist writers at the time when the French fascists almost overthrew the government in February 1934. It is equally ironic to find Ezra Pound's essay on Crevel, with its laudatory reference to Mussolini and its refrain on usury, being used to preface a reprint of Crevel's satirical novel, *Les Pieds dans le plat* ("Putting One's Foot In It"). Crevel forcefully expressed his hatred of anti-Semitism and Hitler in that novel, and his detestation of Mussolini elsewhere.

With *La Mort difficile*, written in the year of his mother's demise, Crevel probes the conflict within the mother-fixated Pierre. The protagonist is torn between his ambivalent regard for the self-sacrificing Diane and his passion for Arthur Bruggle, an equivocal American modeled on the painter Eugene MacCown, to whom the author was devoted. Dreamlike elements and a rather mannered insistence on repetition betray the work's Surrealist connection. Black humor merges with self-pity. David Rattray's translation is at times ingenious. However, Pierre's mother admires slim legs as a token of breeding (*signe de race*), not of "race." In her prejudiced vocabulary, "foreigner" is too anodyne a word for the pejorative *métèque*. A reference to the poet Lamartine, hero of the Second Republic, is eluded: Crevel liked to satirize the liberal "Lamartinian current," otherwise graciously qualified as "the dustbins of liberalism." To find an equivalent for the American's amusingly painful misuse of French genders looks impossible. One realizes how skillful, witty, and idiosyncratic Crevel's use of language can be. He had no small talent as a punster, satirist, and polemicist.

After the *événements* of May 1968 there was a revival of Crevel's work in France in the Seventies, when several of his books were reprinted. One admirer went so far as to declare: "The explosion of May [1968] places the figure of Crevel, that dark archangel, in the forefront of those who refuse to live divided against themselves." A curious observation, surely, since in Crevel's case that refusal meant self-immolation. The rebellious author of *Babylone* could serve as model for a new generation of rebels. He, too, was opposed to religion, family, country (in whose name so many had perished in the 1914-18 War), and all existing institutions.

High among his pet hates were liberal parliamentary democracy, capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. His terminology sometimes recalls that of fashionable theorists of the Sixties and after. When he excoriates the privileged swine (*salauds*) or invokes "oceans of wrath" to drown the bourgeoisie and all its works, he sounds like a precursor of Sartre and his heirs. Crevel's heady combination of revolt, homosexuality, and drug-taking doubtless remains in vogue in certain circles even today. To some, however, Crevel may appear as yet another of those gifted, confused, and misguided writers who found a temporary haven for their disarray and their nihilism in a totalitarian ideology: in short, a weak reed.

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Frank Stella's crisis

Frank Stella Working Space. Harvard University Press, 177 pages, $30

reviewed by Tim Hilton

Two considerations are bound to direct our reading of Frank Stella's book, an extensively illustrated volume which prints the Charles Eliot Norton lectures he delivered at Harvard three years ago. First, we will want to know about the attitudes that have so often made Stella's painting prominent in the last quarter of a century. These turn out to be ambitious. It is not often (not in public, anyway) that an artist proposes a large historical scheme to explain the history of art, his own work, and also the desirable future of art. Yet this is Stella's purpose; and those who admire his painting will find, on reading *Working Space,* that they are being asked to admire it far more thoroughly than they have done heretofore.

Secondly, however, and more importantly, we will want to know whether what we are being told is true. It is unfortunate that the nature of Stella's lectures rather inhibits discussion of their contents. He has been speaking at a dignified academic event, but for not more than sixty minutes on only six occasions; and this has allowed his natural disposition for crisp statement to accelerate into an oracular rattle. Stella's beliefs are not so much argued as they are asserted: he takes notice only occasionally of opinions that are not his own; and his lectures are full of near-aphorisms, sudden generalizations, changes of direction and of mood. Furthermore, he is a showman. Like more experienced lecturers, Stella knows how to gain effect from an unexpected slide, and knows ways to introduce it. "When I think of what is wrong with painting, one painting, Paulus Potter's *Young Bull* (1647), trots confidently into the ring." (The confidence, one notes, is Stella's, not the bull's or the picture's: this is not the only place in his book where egotism and syntactical error are married.) He sets a Kandinsky of 1913 against a Titian of 1534, and has the idea of transferring the *Mona Lisa* to the Uffizi, where it might represent, he conjectures, "a new dawn, a glass house rising above the jagged Levittown of gold altar pieces."

All this is enlivening, especially if one can imagine the Harvard occasions when Stella spoke. But nothing that was said in the lectures is substantiated in the printed version. There are no footnotes or references in *Working Space.* The book lacks an introduction and a bibliography. Stella evidently feels free of the obligation to elaborate and justify his arguments. But there will be other students of art who feel that there is much to question in Stella's view of history, and much that might have been put differently, or might not have been said at all, had our lecturer spent more time in study and, perhaps, had he not walked quite so quickly through museums. It is maybe beside the point to mention such academic demurrals, for the character of *Working Space* is precisely in its want of reflection. Yet is has to be said that the haste of the book is irritating. Each of Stella's thoughts seems to have occurred to him for the first time, as though he had no background in art.

In this way Stella offers a lesson he will not have intended. It is often assumed that artists of his generation—who were born in the late 1930s and became celebrated with their first shows in the early 1960s—were intellectually sophisticated in a way their predecessors had not been. They were held to be sharper, quicker with their insights, more knowledgeable—bright new artists whose talents were all the more evident because those talents had been nurtured and polished in universities. I doubt whether this notion (which, admittedly, may have had more purchase on the English side of the Atlantic) could survive a reading of *Working Space.* A peculiarity of the book is that its author, returning to a university and given a temporarily professorial status, skids back to the condition of being a student. He even reproduces one of his student paintings. The engaging final chapter describes Stella's experiences at Andover and Princeton and the

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wonderful adventure, after graduating in the summer of 1958, of going to New York to become a painter. But this is not simply genial reminiscence. To end his book at the beginning of his own artistic life seems to be the result of a psychological compulsion. Does not the reversion to his youth explain Stella's dismissal of Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski in *Working Space*? We remember that Olitski (born 1922) and Noland (born 1924) had years more painting experience—and, I dare say, more knowledge of the history of art through that experience—than had Stella (born 1936) when he first came to public attention. For one reason or another the three artists were often associated in the later 1960s and early 1970s. But they were not contemporaries, and the difference of generation now seems particularly acute. For although they do not say so in as many words, Stella's lectures record his desire to supersede these older artists.

It is the longing for a career that is so saddening about Stella's prognostications. To return with him to the 1960s, how was he to get past Noland and Olitski? For an artist with his attributes, their painting was unhelpful. He could not match Noland's color sense; and since a painter's color is (usually) the part of his art that takes longest to mature, it was not likely that Stella's painting might quickly be advanced by color alone. Olitski's creative improvisation and old-professional mastery of surfaces were also alien to Stella, who very shortly after his novitiate began to pre-plan his paintings and to apply pigment mechanically. *Working Space* re-creates these difficulties, but it does so by ignoring them rather than by facing them. The future of painting, Stella says, is something he can imagine, and almost describe: but he cannot imagine that future as a matter of palette and touch. Nor, it seems, is he particularly interested in drawing with paint. It follows that Stella, in depreciating so much that other painters value, will not have much sympathy for his contemporaries. And in fact his fellow-feeling seems to be reserved for non-painters: Donald Judd, "hipsters like Hollis Frampton and Carl Andre," whom he knew and admired at Andover, and Philip Leider, the former editor of *Artforum*.

It was in Leider's catalogue essay for the exhibition "Stella Since 1970," held at the Fort Worth Museum in 1978, that we first read of Stella's painting in connection with Caravaggio's. This putative relationship, so hard to believe in, is a main theme of *Working Space,* and there are one or two other things in Leider's catalogue that appear in amplified form in the Harvard lectures. One day, conceivably, art historians will wish to trace the various ideas about abstraction that were current in Stella's circle; and they will wonder how developed these ideas really were. *Working Space,* however, is too speedy a book to help such an inquiry. Perhaps this is because Stella is such a believer in crisis. But it is also because his paintings simply fail to illustrate his thesis. The Caravaggio identification is *willed,* in the special sense that it is proclaimed by lecturing, not by painting. Stella believes that abstraction is imperilled, that there is "a parallel with a similar crisis in painting at the end of the sixteenth century," and that "we may have to seek out Caravaggio's way directly to help combat the recent enervation of painterliness." Can it really be believed that this program applies to painting generally? Or is it a hunch that Stella has about himself, and a way of proclaiming the overwhelming importance of his own recent work?

There is a view that—all in all, and with some exceptions—Stella's most convincing art has not been in his latest pieces but in his first, the "black paintings" of 1958-60. Thereafter, in the differing sets of work he presented, there was invention and a commanding presence. But he proceeded by substitution. The components of painting were replaced by things that resembled those components. Irregular stretchers are preferred to rectangular ones. Enamel, aluminum, fluorescent alkyd take the place of oil or acrylic. Day-glo color wipes out fine-art color. Metal, with lacquered surfaces, replaces canvas. Finally, relief has prece-

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dence over flatness. Each of these substitutions is emphasized to the extent that it becomes the *raison d'être* of the piece. Stella's gift for clenched design unites the conception, or did so until recently. But the piling-up of these deputizing strategies seems now to have ended in a stew. It is not an extension of painting but its parody. For this reason Stella's prints now look better than the huge metal constructions on which they are based. Meanwhile, it appears, the conviction has been growing in Stella that flat, painterly abstraction has "turned to ashes" and become "excruciatingly dull" while his own art has become akin to Caravaggio's, not only in its space but in its ability to reinvigorate a whole tradition. Does he ever wonder why other painters are disinclined to believe this theory?

Impatient faith

Dana Gioia Daily Horoscope.
Graywolf, 87 pages, $8

reviewed by Robert Richman

The title poem of Dana Gioia's *Daily Horoscope* is a six-page elegy dedicated to the memory of Robert Fitzgerald, the distinguished poet and translator who was Gioia's teacher at Harvard. In the beginning of the poem, Fitzgerald is presented to us entirely stripped of his literary identity. Addressing Fitzgerald throughout the sequence as "you," Gioia places his subject amidst the "unimportant" things in life, things "not worth counting, not worth singling out":

> Today will be like any other day.
> You will wake to the familiar sounds
> of the same hour in the same room,
> sounds which no alarm is needed to announce.

Gioia then proceeds to restore Fitzgerald's uniqueness. He gives us a glimpse of his mentor's ability to discover, in the mundane world around him, the possibility of transcendence. (Gioia sees this as a deeply individualistic power; as he says in the first line of another poem, "Everyone has an entrance of his own" into this transcendent realm.) In the fifth section of the poem, entitled "The Stars Now Rearrange Themselves . . .," Gioia urges Fitzgerald to

> Look for the smaller signs instead, the fine
> disturbances of ordered things when suddenly
> the rhythms of your expectation break
> and in a moment's pause another world
> reveals itself behind the ordinary.

In Gioia's view, finding "another world . . . behind the ordinary" is no small thing. Everyday reality exerts so great a pressure on us that at times it seems to be all there is to life, no matter how much we hunger for some access to the infinite. Early on in the elegy, Gioia decisively asserts that "nothing is hidden in the obvious/changes of the world," no matter how hard "you press against/the surface of impenetrable things." But as accurate as such perceptions seem to be, they invariably turn out to be transient or incomplete.

The rarity and elusiveness of the transcendent moment, however, doesn't make it more important than the everyday world from which it emerges, or so Gioia suggests. In "Daily Horoscope," the ordinary hours Fitzgerald spends in ordinary rooms are just as valuable as the moments of spiritual affirmation he lies in wait for. Just because Fitzgerald *yearns* for these rare instants of vision doesn't bestow on them any greater value than the far more plentiful uninspired moments of his daily life. The transfiguring flash that occurs midway through another poem, "In Cheever Country"—when "The sunset broadens for a moment, and the passengers/standing on the platform turn strangely luminous"—stands in equal relation to Gioia's celebration, at the poem's end, of "the modest places which contain our lives."

The shared value accorded to lived experience and transcendent vision in *Daily Horoscope* may be the chief characteristic of the poetry of the formalist movement now in

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progress in the United States and in Britain—a movement of which Gioia is a part. Put simply, writers of this persuasion consider poetry that concerns itself exclusively with vision *or* experience to be inadequate. They believe the poet's account should be comprehensive enough to include both. The poets of this new movement regard both the external world and the internal domain as essential to a poem.

But if Gioia and his fellow formalists are to be commended for bringing both vision and experience to their poetry, their poetic program still entails certain difficulties. In the hands of lesser talents, it can appear to be little more than a weak, conciliatory gesture, a lame attempt at "peacemaking" between two opposed modalities of poetry. In the right hands, however, the formalist approach can yield great poetic rewards. Dana Gioia is a poet who comprehends the importance of both the subjective, individual, visionary element of the new formalist poetry and its objective, common, existential element, and he is adept at utilizing both. "I can imagine someone who found/these fields unbearable," says Gioia in "California Hills in August," "[a]nd yet how gentle [their sparseness] seems to someone/raised in a landscape short of rain." The poet's alertness to his own view of things and the conventional view of the world hinges decisively on this sympathetic power. It is this same power that allows Gioia's Fitzgerald both to love the world and to seek truth in a realm beyond it.

It is in Gioia's language that we find a reflection of the dichotomy that is at the core of his poetry. At first glance, Gioia's plain diction and simple syntax seem to suggest a staunch commitment to an easily understood "common" language, a clear wish to communicate. Yet Gioia's strikingly unadorned language often seems incapable of encompassing certain aspects of subjective experience. At such moments, Gioia will call upon an image that adroitly disrupts the placid surface which this plain language has created, or, alternatively, "force" this plain style to describe an impossibility—in, for example, "Song from a Courtyard Window," in which we are suddenly told how "all the buildings" in the courtyard "melted to a field, off in some high country . . . ." In the same poem he tells how "[we sat] in the same place with our eyes open/and [knew] that we have moved . . . ." Whatever the method, Gioia's plain-spoken English is now and then jarred into evoking something beyond the ordinary. Again like Fitzgerald, whose transformation into Everyman is necessary for his access to the "unknown," plain diction and perfect syntax are often invoked only to be superseded by imagery. The poet's purpose, though, is never to reveal the inherent weaknesses of unadorned language, just as the point of the Fitzgerald elegy is not to belittle ordinary reality. Gioia's goal is to have a poetry large enough to accommodate both the beauty of literal language (for those moments of experience that are easily shared) and the beauty of metaphorical language (for those moments that are essentially unshareable). He succeeds very well at this.

The difficulties of using ordinary language and ordinary reality as springboards into the inexpressible and the transcendent are, of course, considerable. But Gioia makes the task even more difficult for himself by often choosing the most banal places imaginable as the scenes of these events. Does Gioia do this to test himself? Probably. Whether it's the "smooth, black asphalt" of a suburban parking lot at night, a diner filled with men after a day's labor, or a rented car "[m]iles from anywhere" with a song by the Beach Boys playing on the radio, Gioia has his work cut out for him, and we always feel that the resulting vision has been sufficiently hard-earned. Even if the grim scenes don't culminate in a transcendent moment, Gioia still exerts an especial effort to end things on an optimistic note. "Waiting in the Airport," for example, closes with only the suggestion of transcendence. The last stanza reads:

> But nothing ever happens here,
> This terminal that narrows to

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A single unattended gate,
One entrance to so many worlds.

Yet even this meager affirmation is powerful enough to lend an air of vitality to the disagreeable airport Gioia describes so accurately in the preceding stanzas. Thus when his visionary powers fail, the poet is provoked by the oppressiveness of the mundane world into attempting to salvage something from it.

Gioia challenges himself in another way in the poem entitled "The Man in the Open Doorway." He uses a variation of the Sapphic stanza—with three feet rather than two in the final line of the stanza—to increase the awful sense of the inescapability of the world:

This is the world in which he lives:
Four walls, a desk, a swivel chair,
A doorway with no door to close,
Vents to bring in air.

There are two well-marked calendars,
Some pencils, and a telephone
The women at the front desk answer
Leaving him alone.

There is a clock he hardly sees
Beside the window on the wall.
It moves in only one direction,
Never stops at all.

Paul Fussell, in his study of *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, dismissed this variation of the Sapphic stanza as "excessively weighted" and thus crude and overinsistent in tone. But is is precisely the crudeness and overinsistence of the three-stress lines that make the unremarkable image of escape in the fifth stanza ("the doorway still . . . lit at night") so effective. Gioia's revitalization of a "worthless" poetic form has a curious parallel in the recent revivification of rhyme and meter in the poetic culture at large. Ten years ago, rhyme and meter were considered as outmoded as Fussell deemed this version of the Sapphic stanza to be. Today, however, rhyme and meter are central elements in much of our best poetry. Indeed, it is another common interest of the poets in the movement to which Gioia belongs.

As understanding as Gioia is of the necessity of both vision and experience, and as technically and imaginatively capable he is of exploiting this awareness in his poetry, *Daily Horoscope* would be a lesser book were it not for the inclusion of the poem entitled "The Room Upstairs." "The Room Upstairs" is a 117-line dramatic monologue dealing with the main peril of Gioia's own undertaking, namely, permitting dream and reality to intermingle. (If there is a common flaw among the younger formalist poets, it is their refusal to grapple with this issue.) The speaker in "The Room Upstairs" is the owner of a boardinghouse in a college town. Unmarried and childless, he formed an attachment years ago to a "clever, handsome" student named David who had lived in the boardinghouse. After graduation, David was killed in a rock-climbing accident. The narrator relates David's story because the room he intends to offer his guest is the one David favored. After recounting the dream he had the night he heard the news of David's death, the narrator tells his visitor:

That's all there is to say. I can't explain it,
And now I'm sorry to have bored you so.
It's getting late. You know the way upstairs.
But no, of course not. Let me show you to
your room.

The narrator's confusion of David and the guest is harmless enough. But it nevertheless points up the potential danger of allowing "the room upstairs"—i.e., the imagination—to encroach too much on one's daily life. It is, in short, about the hazards of poetry.

Even such a delicate acknowledgment of this risk, however, does little to diminish Dana Gioia's infectious enthusiasm for a world (not to mention a language) many poets perceive to be hopelessly gone to seed. For Gioia, the degraded landscape of late twentieth-century America is full of mystery, surprise, and the hope of spiritual fulfill-

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ment. In fact, it's very much like a letter, for which, as he says in "The Letter," the book's penultimate poem, we "Check . . . the postbox with impatient faith,/Even on days when mail is never brought."

Keeping the Sabbath

Chaim Grade My Mother's Sabbath Days. Translated by Channa Kleinerman Goldstein and Inna Hecker Grade. Knopf, 397 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Donna Rifkind

No golems or dybbuks terrorize the Jews of Vilna in this posthumously published memoir by the Yiddish writer Chaim Grade; no Singer-like demons spook his townspeople in punishment for the impiousness or indigence of their souls. Grade's book emphasizes instead, in a kind of literature which seems to extend directly from Talmudic ideals, the daily concerns of his peddlers and shopkeepers—their families, rituals, livelihoods, and hopes for a better life. In *My Mother's Sabbath Days,* as in the author's collection of novellas, *Rabbis and Wives* (published in 1982), fear and faith present themselves not through goblins but in everyday circumstances, and poverty is not spiritual but material and mean.

Grade was born in Vilna in 1910, the only surviving child of his father's second marriage. Two younger sisters and his father, a rabbinical scholar, died while he was very young, and he spent his adolescence living with his mother, Vella, in the dark back room of a blacksmith's shop. Vella sells fruit by the gate of her courtyard; it is a harsh life for a widow, made harder by her disappointment in her son, who has cast aside his religious books and has given up keeping the Sabbath. Chaim instead reads novels and wanders around the courtyard observing his neighbors, who include a goose-dealer, a grocer, his mother's fruit-peddling partner Blumele, and various tradesmen, wives, scholars, and synagogue attendants.

Everyone in this small community is looking forward to some future redemption for their severe lives, but Chaim is unmoved by any such thoughts. While he rejects the unwavering commitment to prayer and ritual to which his mother and her generation adhere, he is not drawn either to the messianic dreams of the other young Jews, some of whom intend to escape to what they fantasize will be an idyllic agrarian life in Soviet Russia. Others dream of becoming *halutzim* (pioneers) in Palestine.

In looking back at this community, the older Grade presents it entirely without sentimentality. The people he remembers are pious, yet not above a lot of energetic bickering; Vella and her partner Blumele, in their constant arguments, fire biblical aphorisms at each other as if to add the weight of centuries to their opinions, and ill-willed gossip circulates among even the most devout worshippers. But in the cramped alleys and dark rooms, amid the petty exchanges, there are small recesses of calm, even of joy, and hints of treasure. When Blumele dies, Vella feels her absence keenly; the old woman has left a clock with Hebrew letters on it to Chaim, and Vella warns him not to shame her memory by forgetting to wind it. On top of the oven Vella keeps a box full of her dead husband's Passover dishes, made holy by her desire to honor his memory: a Seder plate, tea glasses, silver goblets, a sieve.

To Vella's delight, Chaim becomes engaged to a nurse, the daughter of a rabbi from Warsaw. Her name is Frumme-Liebche (pious love). The engaged couple moves to Warsaw so she can work in a hospital near her home, where they marry. Vella herself, not wanting to be alone, marries a forbiddingly silent greengrocer named Reb Refoel Rosenthal. It is at this point in the narrative that the war begins; there is talk of hearing "that Haman in Berlin" on the radio, and the initial joy about the Soviet assistance against the Germans in Poland turns immediately to fear. Grade writes, "Now they would not leave me alone in my room; now no one is permitted to be sad."

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Just before the Germans invade Russia, Chaim runs into a stocking peddler named Zalman, a former intellectual and Social Democrat who had had great hopes for his artistic children. His eldest son Yudka ran off to Russia to become a painter, but Zalman says bitterly, "'We've known all along that he wasn't studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Moscow, as he dreamt he would. We've assumed he was toiling away in some coal mine in the Donbas.'" The stocking peddler, like other parents in the book whose children have left for Russia, fears his son has been annihilated along with "spies and Trotskyists." Yet another fear takes over Vilna when the Russian army begins its retreat from Lithuania. Chaim says goodbye to his mother in Vilna and starts to flee with his wife, but when they reach a neighboring town Frumme-Liebche decides to return to Vella, thinking, as many Jews did at the time, that the Nazis would spare women and children. She urges Grade to escape into Russia alone.

Grade's guilt overcomes him as he passes through burned-out villages and destroyed factories with a crowd of refugees: "I shall remember, my little mother, I shall remember your steps in your heavy shoes as you walk across the crooked cobblestones . . . . I want to tear myself from my memory, but [Frumme-Liebche's] voice catches up with me." He continues with masses of similarly hysterical people, travelling east along the Moscow Highway, beginning what will be a sort of stunned travelogue through the towns of southern Russia. For the first time in the book, images become less concrete, more hallucinatory: the wooden leg of a Jew left behind in Borisov seems to be following Grade; a *durachok* (simpleton) in a transport car, accused of being a spy, jumps from the train and is shot, and the locomotive seems to Grade to be humming "*dura-chok, dura-chok*" as it passes through Orsha, Smolensk, Bryansk, Kursk, Voronezh.

In the Saratov region, Grade finds work in a kolkhoz (collective farm) harvesting rye in the place of the Russians who are at the front. He moves farther east to the Volga, and finally into the steppes of Kazakhstan, near the Aral Sea, settling for a while in a town called Stalinabad (now called by its original name, Dushanbe). It is a ghostly place to Grade, empty except for a few exotic-looking Asiatics, crippled Russian soldiers, and refugees. The hallucinatory images have now become more stark, as if to fit in with the wide, bare landscape: amputees try to dance, despite their missing limbs, with girls in the park; when Grade runs he feels as if he is kicking a human head in front of him. A shoemaker, lacking materials to mend Grade's shoes, and unable to speak Russian or Hebrew, hands him a prayerbook and a pomegranate. It is Rosh Hashanah, and the old man wishes Grade to say the traditional prayer of thanks in honor of the new year. No other scene in the book shares the degree of other-worldliness here, below snowy mountains, purple clouds, and huge blank rocks, as Grade thinks of his dark town of Vilna: "My mother and Frumme-Liebche are . . . there; and I sit here, with a pomegranate for Sheheheyonu [the prayer of thanksgiving] in my hand . . . ."

After a year and a half in Central Asia, Grade returns to live in another part of Vilna after the war. He cannot stop himself from walking back through the ruined and empty ghetto. Little remains to indicate the busy lives that have recently ended there. The alleyways seem to have shrunk to nothing without the people. Pacing through the narrow passages, he is obsessed with the destruction, but reluctant to hear any facts about the deaths of his wife and mother. He meets a few survivors—a shoemaker who insists he sees his dead little daughter in a candle flame; a pediatrician whose scale for weighing babies stands empty. From what they tell him, he guesses that his mother was shot on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish year: "All her life she had lived with the Sabbath and with Yom Kippur, and she went to Ponary [a mass-grave site] as she would go to the synagogue." On Yom Kippur eve he goes to look at his mother's and Reb Rosenthal's house, whose door is covered with cobwebs. A nearby temple's

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decaying ceiling is pouring a rain of accumulated water that may as well be tears. Another synagogue has sprouted a field of sunflowers over its floor, and the flowers nod toward the empty ark like old men praying. At the beth midrash (religious school) where he had studied as a boy, Grade asks, "Where shall I go? Where can I find a place for myself? All the Jews have been exterminated; only their Yom Kippur still dwells within me, . . . yet I cannot pray . . . ."

In *My Mother's Sabbath Days*, Grade has combined memoir with fiction to portray both a community and the forced abandonment of it; he has shown memory in its relentlessness to be both a necessity and a curse. He died in 1982 in New York. As his second wife, Inna Hecker Grade (a co-translator of the book), writes in her foreword, "It had been Chaim Grade's dream to rescue his mother from her hard fate, from her unremitting toil, to give her hope, to give her joy. What he gave her instead was utmost despair . . . . And yet, if he was able to survive, and more, to create, it was because his mother became the guiding star of his life." So Vella becomes something of a saint in her son's agonized recollections of her: she has been made holy by his desire to keep her memory intact, just as Vella had sanctified her husband's Passover dishes and Blumele's clock with the Hebrew letters. Through Grade's resolute, grief-fueled writing, his memory of Vella takes on nearly the solidity of a held object, a keepsake. Whether she was indeed a saint or merely a poor, pious woman, one cannot ignore the power with which Grade invokes her spirit.

Yet for all the power of his writing, Grade remains helpless. Just as there are no ghosts or demons in this book, neither are there any heroes—the author has not been able to save his mother, and his memories of her provide little comfort. There remains only an impassioned attempt to describe blessings and agonies, mothers and sons, a strong sense of the weight of life and life's forfeiture. This attempt is certainly not new in the growing body of Holocaust literature, but one feels it is fortunate that Grade's admirable work has been added to this body, that something else from this destroyed world has been kept.

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Notebook

Kitchen video culture

by Michael Brandow

Infiltrating an avant-garde requires, if not courage, then a great deal of courtesy. Our party (the opposition, though open-minded) is greeted at the front door of one such stronghold—The Kitchen on West 19th Street—with a scene reminiscent of *The Wizard of Oz*: a voice box nervously asks the purpose of our visit and, not less than a few minutes later, the door is buzzed open. It turns out that we have arrived a bit too early and so are instructed to take the elevator to the upstairs lobby where we will wait until the show begins. Upstairs, a table has been laid out with brochures for upcoming events at this and other "postmodern" outposts. A large painting of the Brandenburg Gate hangs on the left wall; to the right, a photograph of Nietzsche with a caption: "I find it difficult to imagine being an artist and not being insane."

The guests are directed back down to the main floor and into a mammoth black chamber. It is of proportions that would surely meet the standards of a loft-holding society. But the furnishings, which might have brought a comforting familiarity in a more private setting, cast uneasiness about the guests: six television monitors stand symmetrically in the vast space, three on one side, three on the other, glowing blue and making us feel we're somehow being watched. Clutching our ticket stubs, we're assured that we are, in fact, the audience and not the show.

The monitors are restless. We should choose our seats among them before the master switch is pulled. Seated in a panic, we're teased for a minute or two with an occasional vertical roll or a dash of what our forefathers, I believe, called "snow." Perhaps there will be a sampling of several *faits divers* across the six screens, a kind of three-ring circus, entertainment buffet-style.

"Yeah I fucked him." We're introduced to six identical images of a rather outgoing young woman. "I fucked him," she repeats. The audio has been relegated to the blackest area at the back of the chamber, creating an odd, detached effect. We wonder whether this is a specimen of the "dematerialized space" that was promised in the evening's program.

The "video" we are witnessing, *The Amazing Voyage of Gustave Flaubert and Raymond Roussel,* is, as the program sets forth, "concerned with the impact of late nineteenth-century thought and is filtered through recent French psychoanalytic theory (specifically that of Lacan)." The filtering is Freudo-Marxist: we are asked to allow the total effect of the technology to enact a "transformation of consciousness."

The gist of the presentation seems to be not only "the failure of the novel as a literary form" but the allegedly absurd condition of postmodern man. We're shown children, odd groups of people, hand puppets, shadow figures—even a woman exercising on the beach—all being made to recite passages from Flaubert, Roussel, and Marx. We're

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also treated to the occasional comic relief of Camp TV commercials from the 1950s. Some time into our total seventy minutes of abuse, we are told, by way of a vague reference to Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,* that events in history occur twice: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. "Now it's simply one farce after another," a woman's voice goes on to interpret Marx's observation. "It's all just farce."

The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, Dance, Performance and Film, during its fifteen years of existence, has emphasized video as a new and important medium with unprecedented artistic possibilities. In a recent festival called "Film/Video Works 1986," however, it called for "a more direct confrontation" between film and video, adding that "the similarities . . . supersede the differences."

Whatever the similarities between video and film, it is true that video's game plan is innovation, and its field of possibilities extends far beyond The Kitchen. Monitors find their way into the strangest of places: as insidious props on stage sets, as momentary distractions in chic nightclubs, as moving *tableaux* in certain major museums. The supposed liberating potential of machines makes the "independent" video artist, though, feel morally obliged to take art "out of the museums" in the crude, literal sense of electronic replication. In this confusion of means and ends, the technical newness alone makes video, *ipso facto,* a tool for exploration, for revolt against "old" forms and ideas: the avant-garde is alive and well.

If revolution can become farcical, as The Kitchen's gloss on Marx claims, it follows that the concept of the avant-garde can too, with video leading the way. What video has produced so far—to judge from my recent investigations—is a coterie of devoted admirers with its own dress code, language, and canon of critical works. Rising above the mass of French berets which characterize a video audience is, for instance, proper video parlance, which requires that we "view" (rather than "see") each "tape" (rather than "film") on a "monitor" (rather than "screen"). And a vast critical apparatus has developed around such words, providing a social justification for the medium. Without it the video cult would almost cease to exist.

One recent example of video theorizing is a collection of essays edited by John Hanhardt of the Whitney Museum entitled *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation.* Despite the title, video itself and the issue of its autonomy in relation to film are not discussed directly in these essays; rather, the book has been assembled to treat the larger issue of "post-industrial art," of which video is the quintessential form. If *Video Culture* is any measure, it would not be unreasonable to infer that an attempt is being made to tint video with certain doctrines. In the absence of outright Marxism, psychoanalysis is the apparatus by which video is given a privileged position in the search for forms of "realism."

Most of the essays in *Video Culture* are extremely political. Hans Magnus Enzenberger, for example, in his essay "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," goes so far as to call written communication a fundamental source of oppression. The implication seems to be that spoken and visual communications are innocuous, because they do not lend themselves to intimidating the masses with "formalized" criteria. Ignoring the social concern for *le mot juste* in video society, Mr. Enzenberger claims that formalized language, written language in particular, is an unnecessary restriction:

> Spelling mistakes, which are completely immaterial in terms of communication, are punished by the social disqualification of the writers . . . . Intimidation through the written word has remained a widespread and class-specific phenomenon even in advanced industrial societies.

Enzenberger's approach is explicitly Marxist. He continues by searching out the physical cause—the material base—of the oppression:

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> . . . almost everybody speaks better than he writes. (This applies to authors.) Writing is a highly formalized technique which, in purely physiological terms, demands a peculiarly rigid bodily posture.

Walter Benjamin's erstwhile classic "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is the opening essay of the collection. Benjamin does not condemn writing per se, but he does give a tendentious history of the social role of art. According to Benjamin, "aura"—that is, the superfluous metaphysical element of art—is the source of the fantastical, and therefore fascist, "cult value" in art objects. "Aura" will be finally destroyed when art can be reproduced, rendering the very notion of the "original" obsolete.

Judging from *Video Culture,* "fantasy" is still associated with oppression. Yet advocates of a more visual approach to art feel obliged to account for the boredom that audiences often experience when confronted with a more "realistic" medium. In "Film Going/Video Going: Making Distinctions," Douglas Davis, a writer for *Newsweek,* gives video a philosophical dimension:

> Alone once more, in the home, not formally seated, or surrounded by large numbers of people. In that moment, we can also be connected to the uncertainty of real life . . . . What we call "live" video links with "life" in a highly concentrated form; when we are watching "live" phenomena on the screen we participate in a subtle existentialism. Often so subtle that it nears boredom. Yet we stay, participating.

The seemingly long duration of so many video works, David Antin suggests in "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium," can be explained in terms of what we've been conditioned to expect from television. A major goal of video artists, however, is to differentiate video works from television:

> It is no accident that the best of these works have, at least in part, a didactic and moral element behind them and are "exemplary." And

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> even the tapes that are not specifically presented in an exemplary mode become exemplary in their fundamental disdain for television time.

The dialectic thus reads: Our failure to respond positively to video works can be attributed to our resistance to new and "difficult" perceptions of reality, to our inherent "bourgeois" consumerism, and hence to our basic "reactionary" nature. The question is, after nearly two decades of experimentation, are we to accept the "revolutionary" nature of video art or simply wait for something less self-conscious to come along? Looking at a few examples of recent video art, I see little of substance in the claim for video's liberating powers. Its sedative effect, on the other hand, is all too apparent.

The Kitchen's guests are directed this time to a small "Viewing Room" reserved on Saturday afternoons for those who prefer the more obscure pieces. *My Father Sold Studebakers* is billed as a "visual essay," though it is closer to a home movie. It was made by an aging hippie who hoped that by interviewing members of his family he could answer the question of why he and his deceased father never got along. By performing this catharsis with the help of technology, he seemed to think, he would somehow resolve the issue. The story is touching—and cloying—in the way of *Terms of Endearment* or an AT&T commercial.

The second "visual essay" is *My Mother Married Wilbur Stump.* An old woman reminisces over her deceased husband, a legendary local piano-bar musician. Halfway through the second "visual essay," the entire audience, composed of myself and the woman seated three rows behind me, walks out of the Viewing Room.

Back in the main chamber one evening, we're greeted by six images of Laurie Anderson warning us to prepare for a little bit of "difficult music." Though her voice has been treated electronically, the message is only half ironic. *Two Moon July,* despite some passages of clever editing and some amusing moments of satire by David Byrne, is in fact very "difficult" to sit through. The audience, this time full of press people and heavily beret'd, is assaulted by an unimprovised cacophony of saxophone, piano, and electric guitar performed, we see on the monitors, in a loft space very similar to The Kitchen's. The audience is asked to discipline itself further while listening to the arduous redundancy of Philip Glass, the high priest of minimalism (and, incidentally, a board member of The Kitchen). A few more 1950s commercials and then Laurie Anderson returns to tell us that "language is a virus brought here from another planet" (said, by the way, in perfectly grammatical English). At one point, a dancer stops in between contortions to inform us just how difficult what we are witnessing really is: we "will never read about this art in *The New York Times,*" he says. This video was made expressly for PBS, and rumor has it that several half-hour pieces are in the making. It was funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the New York State Council on the Arts.

Back in the Viewing Room, another "difficult piece," *Der Riese* ("The Giant"), follows. A German video artist, Michael Klier, selected by The Kitchen no doubt because of the "punk" fascination for all that is German, shows us a dreadfully long compilation of tapes made by surveillance cameras. The subject of the study is probably the role of photography as a tool of manipulative power. We watch airplanes landing, people walking, but mostly traffic jams.

This time I was the only one in attendance and the only one to walk out halfway through.

A special treat in the large chamber, not part of the "Film/Video 1986" series, is a "multi-media" drama piece by John Jesurun, who once won an "Obie" award from *The Village Voice.* Jesurun tries to "examine the way in which information is exchanged in a media saturated society." The piece, entitled *White Water,* was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This is the story of a young boy who claims to have been visited by a glowing woman, whom the

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media portrays as the Virgin Mary. The boy says he was given a mysterious life-sustaining liquid. A cynical minister, brought in for consultation, says the substance has the taste of chocolate. Jesurun segments his characters on several monitors which run while the same actors perform live onstage, talking about the existence of God and the importance of man. Shallow ontology is invoked in a dialogue that is stupid and pretentious, loaded with clichés and cheap puns, words like "love" and "religion" ringing out at choice moments—all, again, in a deadpan, pseudo-ironic tone that is unaccompanied by any of the intelligence we normally associate with an ironic viewpoint.

Halfway through the "multi-media" drama piece, the friend I had brought along became restless. The screens, she complained, were hurting her eyes. I apologized for yet another disappointment, and tried to explain on a sheet of paper that the logistics of this theater-in-the-round did not permit the audience to leave the chamber without walking straight across the stage. Resisting a devilish thought, she pulled out a bag of white chocolates and opened her copy of *Washington Square*.

Reconciling video's theories with the works themselves is not so "difficult." What video's theoreticians fail to take note of is the simple lack of content in video works. If there is a theme to be discerned, it is one which concerns both the videos and the spectators, involving each differently. It would seem that behind whatever new forms video has supposedly given us, there is an agenda: intelligent, thoughtful people will be made to look foolish. For video culture, as seen through the actual themes presented in the video works, adheres to a special notion of the ironic viewpoint, a notion that is closer to a Surrealist aesthetic than a Marxist one. Nightmares resurface through the language: in the words we recall the notion of "automatic writing" and the prophecy that photography might one day replace the pen as an instrument of communication. The machine, man's voice objectified, is once again directed at the source of all oppression: rational thought.

When David Byrne, a veteran of The Kitchen, coined the term "Talking Heads" as his band's name, he was referring to the mindlessness of television. Video, a further attempt to take art out of the museum and into the living room, works on the same assumptions: "serious art" is an illusion; reality is an invention of mass culture; and art should be a kind of deadpan parody of what we're offered in the commercial media. Intellectual "minimalism" thus triumphs over will, and the artist's presence in the mechanical process is that of a mere "talking head," absent of mind. Since the video artist's job is to free himself from any structured "coherence" (cf. the Talking Heads' film, *Stop Making Sense*), all the burden of discipline normally borne by the artist falls on the audience, which is expected to be rendered, literally, *speechless* by the video. For those somnambulists of the cathode ray, the accidental nature of "realistic" art requires a mere succession of very distinct images which flash, like tarot cards, before their receptive retinas. Since these images are usually related in some way to mass culture, simulating it rather than describing it, Camp is the result. Camp, the true rhetorical mode of video, is considered equal or perhaps even superior to higher forms of irony.

This is not to say, however, that video should be dismissed as harmless nonsense. One of the symptoms of a "media saturated society" is the greater possibility for junk to pass as art. With video art, the fantasy becomes reality: Benjamin's prophecy—that "the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character"—is more or less fulfilled; camera in hand, anyone can be an artist. Apparently, being a "visual" person—in the postmodern world view—is not a choice or a disposition but a superior condition. This conclusion could only be reached at a time when no one reads enough to know better.

Nor should we consider video a transient

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phenomenon. We know an avant-garde can sustain itself when it is backed—as The Kitchen is—by large corporations and powerful board members, and when it can sport the additional cachet of a government grant. Just why it wins this kind of support is an interesting question. Perhaps the corporations consider "exploratory" illiterate art necessary Research and Development for the larger conglomerate of Humanity. Perhaps they are merely heeding the advice of their public-relations agents, who want them to keep up with competitors seen in the media as heroic benefactors of "independent" artists. Putting one foot into the Humanities, the corporations acquire a necessary "intangible asset" without dealing with any of art's real difficulties. Meanwhile, the government agencies—with their vast bureaucratic tangle of grant applications and advisory panels—can feel assured that they are keeping alive the vital tradition of the avant-garde.

But there is a fantastic discrepancy between the "arts policies" of the government and corporations and the aesthetic poverty of what they subsidize. The vast amounts of "Establishment" support that flow toward institutions like The Kitchen may nullify the "radical" content of what is being put forward there. But it is equally possible that the corporate publicists and government bureaucrats are being had—when they are not supporting bad art, they are collaborating with people who are opposed to all the values according to which they exist.

In the end, we have a situation in which art is created by funding, legitimized by "scientific" political theories, and certified critically by the radical press. Among the many ironies of this situation, perhaps the greatest is that the product of this patronage is a parody: the "work of art" in this age of mechanical reproduction has been so frozen by ideology that it has reached its ultimate objective—it has stopped making sense.

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Letters

Translating Montale

To the Editors:

The review by William Jay Smith of Eugenio Montale's *The Storm and Other Things* in the October issue of *The New Criterion* contains many errors and questionable opinions—far more than can be discussed in a letter to the editor. In this necessarily brief and partial reply I should like to comment on Mr. Smith's competence as a critic, first of Montale and second of the art of translation, with special reference to his attack on William Arrowsmith's version of *La bufera e altro.*

Publication in English of a major new translation of the volume of poetry which authoritative critics of Montale consider to be the summit of his art is an important event in a generally bleak season. Reading Mr. Smith's review, it is puzzling to see that he seems to have no special enthusiasm for this wonderful book, nor for Montale, whom he calls "perhaps" the finest Italian poet since Leopardi. Nine-tenths of his comments on the poetry are taken verbatim from Arrowsmith's introduction and notes, or from his reference to the fine study of Guido Almansi and Bruce Merry, *Eugenio Montale: The Private Language of Poetry* (Edinburgh University Press, 1977). When Mr. Smith does venture an opinion of his own it is at variance with the consensus of commentators both in Italy and elsewhere: thus he insists that Montale's "tone is always conversational, and some of the most hermetic passages are phrased as they might be in ordinary conversation," whereas nearly all readers find Montale "allusive to the verge of obscurity" (Glauco Cambon) and "difficult, harsh, anti-musical" (Almansi, Merry).

Mr. Smith's description of the Montales, whom he met in Italy in the early Fifties, is similarly at odds with the impressions of others:

> A strange couple they seemed then, he a stocky little man, earthbound, and yet with his eyes fixed off in space or else on some inner vision, while she, his mirror image, as he calls her, with her thick glasses looked for all the world like one of those insects drawn by Grandeville. With her heavy lenses and her sharp tongue, she appeared to precede him, almost with antennae, to lead him about, giving him a sense of reality and providing him a way of coping with the everyday world.

This is a caricature, false, insensitive, cruel. It bears no relation to the friendly, warm, unpretentious couple whom many of us living in Italy in the happy Fifties were privileged to meet. Montale was neither "stocky" nor "little," as may be seen from the photographs—taken in all periods of his life—that were published in the *Corriere della Sera* last summer. And although I saw the Montales a number of times over several years, I never saw him adopt a vacant, distant pose, as of a bard who had to be led about. On the contrary, he was an unpretentious, natural human being, and that no doubt helps account for the extraordinary popularity he enjoyed during his last years. Perhaps most Americans are unaware that he was more beloved in Italy than any poet since Dante, as was evidenced by the thousands of mourners

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at his funeral in Milan in September 1981—an outpouring of affection such as the world has not seen for a poet since the death of Victor Hugo a century ago.

Mr. Smith's portrayal of Mosca is even more misleading, and strangely hostile. She did indeed have to wear very heavy lenses, and was obviously nearly blind without them. To say that she led her husband about is absurd; as Montale himself later put it in a Xenia poem: "I have descended, giving you my arm, at least a million steps" (*Ho sceso, dandoti il braccio, almeno un milione di scale,* Xenia II.5). Montale also describes her as anything but "sharp-tongued": "your speech, so hesitant, so unwary" (*La tua parola così stenta e imprudente,* Xenia I. 8). An accurate description of Mosca by a friendly, perceptive observer is that of Stephen Spender, who recalled meeting her in the late Forties:

> She was a small, auburn-haired, rather heavily made-up lady who wore spectacles with thick lenses that magnified the gaze with which she looked out at the world. She took people in amusedly—not unkindly—but with no illusions about them. Her laugh was of the sort that used to be described as "tinkling." There was certainly something old-fashioned about her, like a watchful guest at a corner table of a boardinghouse on the sea coast. Perhaps she was called Mosca (Montale seems in his poetry to wonder why) because she seemed glinting and flickering: a firefly rather than just a fly, I would have thought. [*The New York Review of Books,* June 1, 1972.]

Spender's portrait brings back exactly the warm person I remember—even to the detail about the hotel dining room—for she did love travel and hotels, where she spent much time on the telephone long distance. Montale again explains: "Listening was your only way of seeing" (*Ascoltare era il solo tuo modo di vedere*). Mr. Smith's caricature of Mosca—one of the unforgettable ladies of poetry—is unjust, patronizing, and unmannerly.

If Mr. Smith seems unenthusiastic about the poetry and the person of Montale (whose admirers are noted for a particular kind of passionate commitment), he is on the other hand surprisingly intent on delivering an all-out assault of Catilinarian fury on the translation of William Arrowsmith. Flying in the face of an exceptionally large array of enthusiastic comments by some of the most authoritative poets, critics, and translators today, Mr. Smith is unable to find anything whatsoever to say about the translation which is not damning: "not only is this translation flawed, frequently incorrect and clumsy, it is, as English, almost wholly unreadable." Furthermore, "there are errors of idiom, of emphasis, omissions that destroy the original image"—which result, in his view, in "a gray, colorless surface that serves only to obfuscate even further whatever obfuscation the poems originally contained."

If any reader should feel tempted to be swayed by such a torrent of rhetoric, I would ask him to notice first that most of Smith's charges are supported by no evidence at all. For, when an example is given, Mr. Smith cites no authority except his personal opinion—neither Montale himself in another context, nor a dictionary, nor one of the poet's well-known *livres de chevet,* nor any of the countless critics who have been publishing commentaries for the past fifty years. Apparently Mr. Smith assumes that an American reader won't know the difference, will accept his *ipse dixit* as enough to settle matters.

He is wrong, over and over again. I cannot respond here case by case, but can only give a few examples. Smith is incensed that "the red on a trout's body (*balenio di carbonchio*) becomes 'carbuncle blaze' rather than 'ruby dazzle.'" In objecting to "carbuncle" it is of course Montale himself and not the translator whom he accuses of "slips [which] are enough to throw the poem off balance." Montale wrote "carbuncle" for obvious reasons. Those gems appear often in classical Latin and in heraldry, and above all in the Old Testament—specifically in famous passages about the new Jerusalem which we know Montale was wont to reread: *stasera quasi al buio/mentre leggevo il Deuteroisaia/sei ricomparsa accanto a me* ("this evening almost at dark/while I was reading the Deuteroisaiah/you reappeared beside me"—Xenia I. i; translated by Camillo Pennati and Frank Kermode). Turning to Isaiah 54:12 we find: "behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colors . . . . And I will make . . . thy gates of *carbuncles.*" "Ruby" does not appear in the Bible at all, nor anywhere else until the twelfth century

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in Old French. Used here it does not seem to add anything to Montale's fastidious austerity—except a touch of ten-cent-store tinsel. Again and again Mr. Smith's "improvements" are what Thomas Mann used to call, I am told, *Verschlimmbesserungen.*

Another passage which Mr. Smith quotes as incomprehensible ("What is one to make of lines like these that encumber almost every page?") comes from Montale's very famous poem "The Eel," which appears in versions by Robert Lowell and John Nims in Glauco Cambon's well-known anthology—and also in Mr. Smith's own version, from the recent *Poems from Italy*, edited by Mr. Smith and Dana Gioia (New Rivers Press, 1985). There one finds his translation of the line he does not understand in Arrowsmith. Montale's original is *che risale in profondo, sotto la piena avversa,* which is so dense with compressed Latinate imagery that Arrowsmith takes two lines to get all the ideas in:

> who struggles upstream hugging the bottom
> under the flood of the downward torrent.

Here now is Mr. Smith:

> swimming upstream against their currents.

I leave it to the reader to decide which translation constitutes "gray, colorless prose." *Risale* means literally "to leap backwards" and has nothing to do with "swimming." Striking details omitted altogether include *in profondo* ("hugging the bottom") and the picture of the river in spate (*sotto la piena avversa*).

Since this translation of "The Eel" seems to be the only example of Mr. Smith's work on Montale that is in print, it is instructive to look at what he does with the rest of the poem. Astonishingly, one finds a number of ideas of his own, English words for which there is no counterpart in Montale. These are italized in the following list:

Nostri mari (our seas)	our *warm* seas
guizzo (flicker)	flickering *thread*
pozze d'acquamorta (stagnant pools)	*those* stagnant pools
fossi (hollows)	*those* hollows
declinano (slope down)	*sweeping* down
torcia, frusta, freccia	*that* torch, *that* whip, *that* arrow
che dice	*proclaiming*
bronco seppellito (buried stump)	*rotted away like a* stump
immersi (immersed)	sunk *as they are*
nel tuo fango (in your mud)	in your *primeval* mud

Having grown up (as Montale also did) with Flaubert as a model of artistic integrity and high seriousness, I find such casual disregard of the original text hard to believe. But elsewhere Mr. Smith even challenges the propriety of Arrowsmith's translation of the title itself: *La bufera e altro.* According to him *e altro* should have been translated as "other poems"—even though it really means "other things." As he explains, "When he so clearly understands all the implications of the word, why Arrowsmith chooses to render it as 'other things' is *a mystery since these words not only destroy any notion of transcendence but also render the entire title trivial* [italics added]."

Apparently Mr. Smith admits that the Italian word may refer to the other world, but if I understand him rightly he is saying that in English "things" carries no notion of transcendence. If so, what of St. Paul again and again, as in II Cor. 4:18: "The things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal." What of Socrates' *ti allo* and Vergil's *sunt lacrimae rerum* and Lucretius's *De rerum natura*? Or Shakespeare:

> Come let's away to prison;
> We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
> . . .
> And take upon's the mystery of things . . . .
>
> (*Lear* V, iii, 8)

Or Wordsworth: "A motion and a spirit, that impels/All thinking things . . ./And rolls through all things" ("Tintern Abbey"). Montale's title has been regularly translated by competent hands from Cambon on as "Other Things"—as befits a poet who saw himself as metaphysical from the beginning.

Mr. Smith's malicious attack on the Arrowsmith translation seems to yield only one bona

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fide mistake—a mistake involving a single letter in a two-letter pronoun: namely, the misreading of *la* ("it," referring to the magnolia tree) in "The Ark" as *li* ("them," referring to the dogs). To be sure, there may be other mistakes, just as others will no doubt hit upon more felicitous language. For, as Montale himself observed in reviewing translations of English poetry into Italian, difficult, polysemous works really need the collaboration of a whole team of translators. In fact, Arrowsmith did seek out and obtain advice from leading Montaleans, some of whom found time for copious comments. I find it hard to believe that so many experts overlooked "on every page" errors of all kinds which so far only Mr. Smith has noticed.

A few years ago, Harry Levin published a memorable review of another famous hatchet-job, Sartre's notorious attempt to dethrone Flaubert ("A Literary Enormity: Sartre on Flaubert" in *Memories of the Moderns,* New Directions, 1980). Finding myself at a loss to account for the Smith attack on William Arrowsmith's translation, I should like to borrow, with apologies, a conclusion from Professor Levin. Such a hatchet-job, he says, is "a *tour de force* of devil's advocacy . . . . Unremitting, like the devil himself, it nags and sneers, it debases and trivializes whatever it touches. One is truly at a loss to imagine whom it will convince." And he concludes that such critiques are "a furious and infuriating assault on nothing less than literature itself."

Gertrude S. Hooker
Farmington, CT

William Jay Smith replies:

Unhappy with my unfavorable reaction to William Arrowsmith's translation of *The Storm,* Gertrude Hooker sets out to destroy my competence as a poet, a critic, and a translator. As a critic, I am said to venture only one opinion of my own and one contrary to that of all the authorities on Montale; as a poet, in her view, I have absolutely no gift for language; and, as a translator, I am wholly incompetent. Furthermore, I am unenthusiastic about Montale in the first place.

I find such a blast astonishing since I thought I had made it abundantly clear that I had written far more in sorrow than in anger. I quoted at length from Arrowsmith's introduction and notes not because I had nothing to say myself but because I found him, an expert classicist, "a brilliant guide through the texts that are echoed in these poems" and because his critical study contains insights that "are always valuable and in some cases even startling in their brilliance." I regretted because of "my high regard for Arrowsmith's work in general" that I did not find his translation of equal brilliance, and that "as an indication of what Montale might have written had he written in English" I found it "by any standard inadequate."

In my piece I certainly showed no lack of enthusiasm for Montale. During the last years of his life, Montale was an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and I am proud to say that I was the one to nominate him for that membership. I certainly did not intend any kind of disparagement in my description of him as "a stocky little man." Since my meeting with the Montales had taken place so long ago, I wondered if my memory had played me false, but I found a photograph of Montale and his wife Mosca taken about the same time that bears me out: tiny Mosca with her thick glasses and full-faced Montale only a few inches taller. In other photographs taken of him in Stockholm I found the same inward, otherworldly gaze that I remembered and which somehow escaped Professor Hooker.

Barbara Howes and I lived in the late Forties in Pian dei Giullari above Florence next door to Andrea Marangoni, Mosca's son by a former marriage, and his wife. I heard a great deal about Mosca and Montale from the Marangonis, who arranged our meeting with them. I agree with Stephen Spender, who was a frequent visitor in our house at the time, that Mosca had an undeniable old-fashioned charm but that with her "tinkling" laugh went a sharp, if not unkind, tongue. I do not agree with Stephen Spender that Montale in his poetry seems to wonder why his wife was called Mosca. He knew very well, as is indicated in the passages that I have quoted, which bear out my impression of her. She was indeed, as he says, his "true eyes," and must have been the warm and wonderful person that Professor Hooker remembers to have inspired Montale to write some of the greatest love poetry

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of the twentieth century. I did not mean to indicate otherwise.

I must add that my four years of residence in Florence in the Forties and Fifties, two of which I spent at the University, and my frequent trips back to Italy since have equipped me to detect, as does Arrowsmith in his notes, a conversational tone in many of the poems in *The Storm.* Professor Hooker not only dismisses my description of these poems but comes with her fascicle of fascinating quotations to prove me "wrong, over and over again" in my comments on the translation. It is unfortunate that, for all their erudite glitter, her quotations are almost totally beside the point. It is a complete distortion to claim that I am accusing Montale himself of throwing his poem off balance by using the word "carbuncle." The carbuncle or the carbuncle-stone, of course, appears in Latin, in heraldry, and in the Old Testament. But in modern English, in Webster's Third, the word, meaning "any of several red precious stones (as the ruby)," is listed as obsolete. In any case, it has unfortunate pustular connotations which are not helpful in the present context. *Ruby,* which Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary defines as an "unidentified gem or substance of great beauty and value, *mentioned in the Bible* [my italics]," especially since the poet is concerned with color, seems more appropriate here in English. My objection is even more to the translation of *balenio,* which means "continual flashing" or "repeated flashes," which "blaze" in English does not at all convey.

Arrowsmith himself is not happy with his title. The problem, he points out, is the word *altro (La bufera e altro).* It does not specifically mean "other poems" and it can mean "other things." What it probably does mean is "more" or "something else." But he settles for "other things." The world, as Professor Hooker, unpocketing her glittering string of quotations, points out, is full of any number of *things.* But the point here is that it is unthinkable that Montale, were he writing in English, with an ear as finely tuned as it is in Italian, would have chosen to call his book *The Storm and Other Things.* He would have settled, as did the poet Charles Wright and several others, for *The Storm and Other Poems,* which loses something but at least is acceptable as English.

My criticism of Arrowsmith, according to Professor Hooker, "yields only one bona fide mistake," which is the misreading of a single letter in a two-letter pronoun—as if such a slip were the most natural thing in the world whereas, as she well knows, Italian sentences are made up of two-letter pronouns and getting them right in translation is essential. This particular passage has been correctly translated by other translators. She simply ignores the other errors that I have pointed out, indicating by implication that I am the one who is wrong and not the translator. If these passages and others have been sanctioned by "leading Montaleans," as she says, those authorities must indeed be embarrassed, to say the least, to review them now.

Not content merely to distort my comments, Professor Hooker attempts a total destruction of my translation of Montale's poem "The Eel." Her defense of the two lines of Arrowsmith that I singled out exemplifies perfectly her ten-cent-store ear for poetry and needs no response. But I must point out that by contending that *risalire* means literally "to leap backwards," she has transformed the eel into a salmon. *Risalire,* as any dictionary will indicate, means "to go up again, to go back, to rise again, to travel upstream"—and since the eel travels in water, I have used the verb *swim.* For the sake of compression, always of primary importance in translating Montale, I have omitted the phrase *in profondo,* which Arrowsmith renders as "hugging the bottom," thereby introducing a note of pure caricature since by its very nature an eel cannot *hug* anything. Every translator of poetry must make difficult choices and these omissions and additions, often governed by the nature of the language into which he is translating, must be judged *in toto* by the final result, which, if he is at all successful, must read as a new poem, however distant at times it may seem from the original. I insist that all the English words which Professor Hooker has taken out of context have their counterpart, though not always a literal one, in Montale's original.

In conclusion to her mean-spirited distortion, Gertrude Hooker states that my observations on Arrowsmith's translation constitute an infuriating assault on literature itself, not unlike that of Jean-Paul Sartre on Flaubert. If this translation is literature, time will tell and my carefully con-

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sidered comments will be forgotten. I like to think that I served the magnificent poet Montale in some small way during his lifetime. I would not now serve his memory if I accepted in English a translation that does him considerably less than justice.

The Cone sisters

To the Editors:
I have just been reading in *The New Criterion* the review of Brenda Richardson's book on the Misses Cone (October, 1986).

My husband and I went to call on Etta quite some time after Dr. Claribel's death. She showed us with pride the *Jeune Fille en Jaune*. Alfred noted with interest that Etta was still collecting.

The fact that the *Blue Nude* should be blue began to make special sense to me after a day in Morocco when I saw the sand dunes of the Sahara. They are red. There are many races of blacks in North Africa but the bedouins are pewter color; the contrast with the red sands makes them look blue.

We must note that the *Blue Nude* is described as a "souvenir de Biskra." I think that Matisse while at Tangier wanted to see the sand dunes with his own eyes and Biskra was the closest place on the edge of the desert.

When John Gunther with his wife was preparing his book *Inside Africa,* Jane took a series of magnificent photographs of bedouins. I asked her to look at the head of the *Blue Nude* and she said that the features, tightly compacted into the center of the face, could only be bedouin.

Margaret Scolari Barr
New York City

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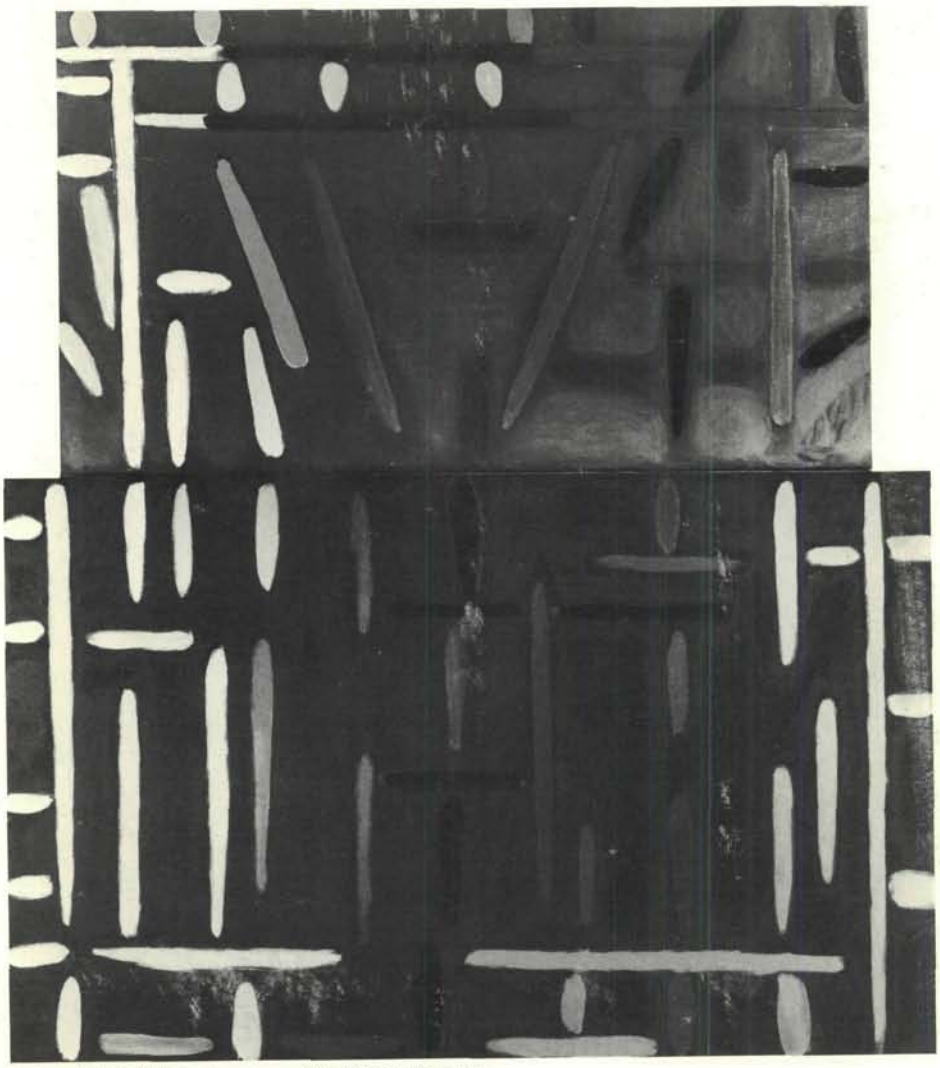

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